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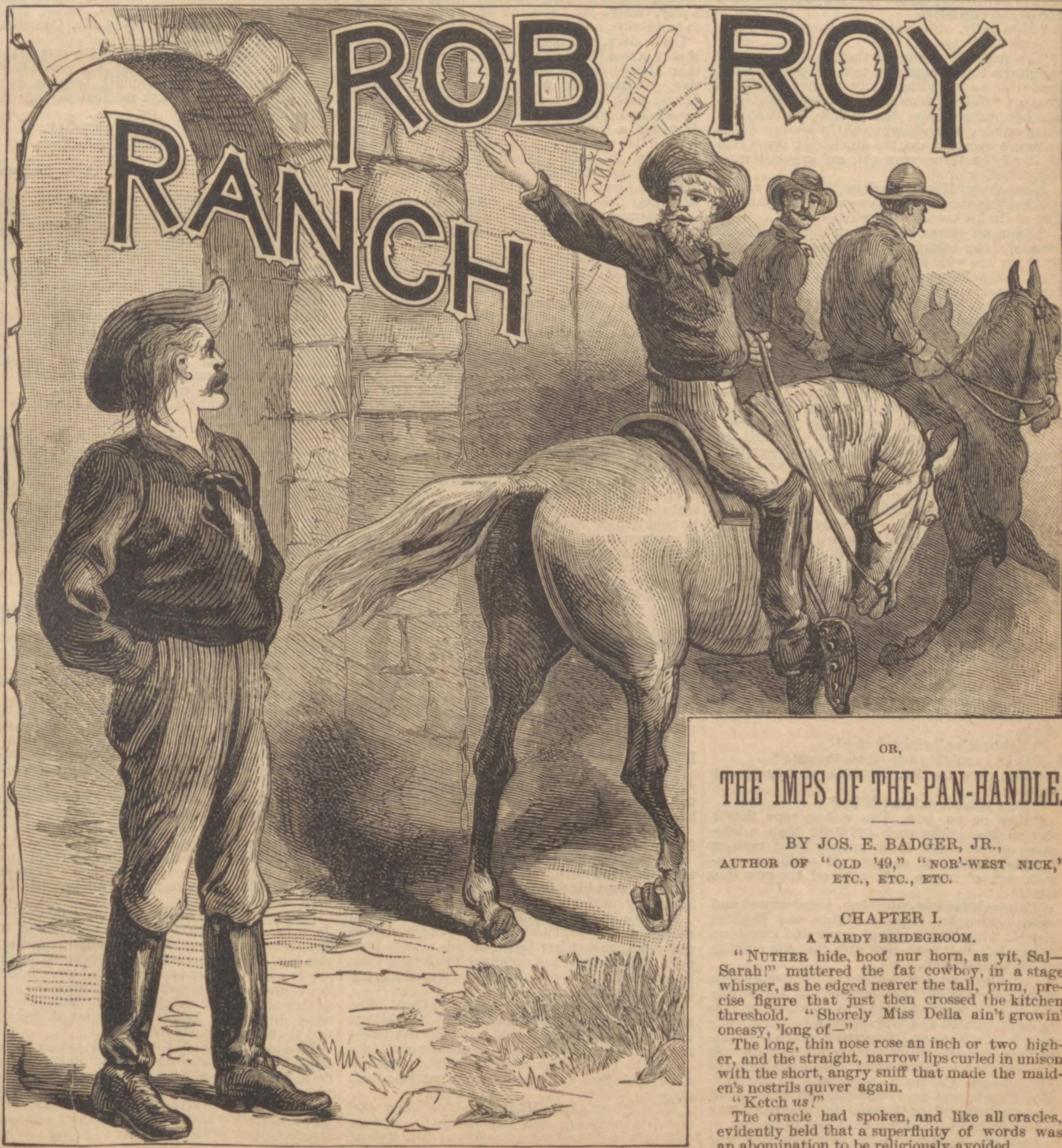
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OR, THE IMPS OF THE PAN-HANDLE.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "NOR'-WEST NICK,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A TARDY BRIDEGROOM.

"NUTHER hide, hoof nur horn, as yit, Sal-Sarah!" muttered the fat cowboy, in a stage whisper, as he edged nearer the tall, prim, precise figure that just then crossed the kitchen threshold. "Shorely Miss Della ain't growin' oneasy, 'long of—"

The long, thin nose rose an inch or two higher, and the straight, narrow lips curled in unison with the short, angry sniff that made the maidens nostrils quiver again.

"Ketch us!"

The oracle had spoken, and like all oracles, evidently held that a superfluity of words was an abomination to be religiously avoided.

"Ef I could ketch you, Sally, I wouldn't keer a cuss fer all the rest o' the herd!" whispered the fat cowboy, with a swift glance around them,

"YOU'RE THINKING OF THE SPREE YOU'RE MISSING, DICK, BUT IT CAN'T BE HELPED.
YOU KNOW THE WORK ON HAND. PERFORM THAT WORK, AND YOU'LL
NOT BE THE LOSER. SO-LONG, NOW!"

Rob Roy Ranch.

then slipping his sturdy arm about the prim virgin's waist, with a half-frightened, half-pleading light in his honest blue eyes.

"You Michael Diggs! I'm amazed and scandalized to think!"

Sarah Stokes turned and stalked back into her fortress, leaving Melancholy Mike to rub his tingling ear with which the virgin's toil-hardened hand had come in violent contact, and to "sigh like a furnace" over the perversity of feminine nature as typified by his divinity.

But the fat cowboy was a true lover, and despite the lugubrious nickname bestowed upon him by his fellows, his was not a nature to long grieve or despond. The rueful grin became a jolly smile, and the love-light deepened in his eyes as he kissed his hand toward the sanctuary which had received his goddess, muttering:

"I'd ruther hev a whack from *her han'*, then a smack from the lips o' the daintiest heifer on the bull range! It'll be no fool job to rope her, but I'll git thar ef it lays in the leather! An' when the jolly good time comes, it won't be Mike Diggs they'll hev to strain thar eyes a-lookin' fer, as they be fer the comin' o' that dandified Scotchman—now *I tell ye!*"

Knowing from past experience that there was little hope of the fair Sally's returning as long as he remained in waiting, Melancholy Mike turned and passing around the corner of the ranch, found himself the focus of a dozen pairs of keen eyes. He shook his head soberly, and as many brows were wrinkled with uneasy anger.

"No new word, Mike? Who'd ye see?" asked one of the cowboys.

"Miss Sally. She didn't say much, but when it come to—"

"To doin', she was all thar, an' every inch weighed a ton!" laughed a tall, stoop-shouldered man who was striding lazily toward the little group. "When Mike tried to *clinch* her with his left duke 'round the middle, the way she slung out her noose-hand would 'a' made a wooden man's eyes bat double quick! It come like the hoof of a three year old, an' cracked wuss then a bull-whip!"

Melancholy Mike joined in the laugh which greeted this speech, but there was a half-hidden menace in his voice as he retorted:

"Saint an' sinner knows your tongue ain't no scandal, John Dumpling, but you don't want to let it hev too wide a range, or somebody 'll run it in fer a Maverick; an' I tote an iron that burns mighty deep!"

"All rounded up an' the bars in place, Mike," laughed Dumpling, good-humoredly. "Not that I'm skeered o' bein' roped as a stray, fer a blind man without eyes kin read the old woman's marks: bald head, upper fork, an' underbit in the two ears, with the ten commandments writ on the face o' me! Now Sally—"

"Ef you're dead-bent on playin' Sally this deal, Dump, I'll go call her out, so's you kin—"

"I'm froze out so soon, Mike," grinned the long cowboy, with a shrug of the shoulders that lent emphasis to his words. "I run away from one woman, but it was sech a starn chase that I hain't rightly ketched my breath ever sense. Ef I have to make another break, I don't reckon I'll be able to stop this side o' eternaty!"

"Durn the chaffin'," shortly interposed another of the cowboys. "What I'd like to know most, is what in time keeps Fergus Cameron out on the range so long!"

"Ef I was boss, he might stay thar till the crack o' doom!"

"It's a crack of a different sort that'd keep him, if I had my say-so!" growled another. "It's throwin' dirt on the little mistress, his keepin' all han's waitin' so long!"

"Ef the boss wasn't so powerful cranky, I'd ax leave fer to go look fer the stray."

"Ruther you do the axin' then me," with a shrug.

"Mebbe it's all right, but—"

"It looks mighty *not* right, though!"

"The wuss fer Mr. Cameron ef it turns out so, then!"

"Now you *air* talkin', Mike!"

"Boss or no boss, I've got a rope that'll stretch his dainty neck out wuss than a telescope ef he cain't show mighty good reasons fer his playin' off so shy. It ain't no common sort o' excuse as'll take off the cuss this time!"

Although far less outspoken, wonderment and uneasy thoughts reigned within the Dement Ranch, where the wedding guests had long been assembled, and were now awaiting the coming of the bridegroom.

Far away on the borders of civilization—in the thinly settled "Pan-handle" of Northwestern Texas—where a ride of a hundred or two miles is counted as a trifle when a ball or a wedding is offered as an inducement, there is an unwritten etiquette which few are powerful enough to transgress with impunity. And against this law, Fergus Cameron, proprietor of the Rob Roy Ranch, was now sinning, but whether of his own free will, or through circumstances over which he had no control, remained to be seen.

Just one week before this evening, word was sent in every direction that on the 18th of the present month, Fergus Cameron and Della Dement were to be united in the holy bonds of

matrimony, at the fashionable—for the Pan-handle—hour of 8 P. M.

Nothing more was added, because all the rest went without saying. Of course there would be a rousing supper, where all could eat, drink and be merry without the slightest restraint. And equally of course, a dance would follow, in which old and young, wise and otherwise would meet on a perfect equality.

All this was a matter of course, and even the fact of a wedding was one which created little surprise. But the name of the happy man was a surprise! Surely the announcement must have got transformed on the way? For Cameron read Radford.

"Be blessed ef I kin say how, but that's the right word," doggedly returned Melancholy Mike when questioned by a doubting fair one; and as he turned to ride away he added below his breath: "It's blisterin' the tongue o' me, to be puttin' that ugly name whar t'other'd ort to be—so it is, now!"

To the wedding flocked all within "getting-there" range, and though the fair sex was limited, as it ever is in a purely stock range, there were more than enough to keep pretty Della Dement in hot water, figuratively speaking. When hints and broken sentences failed to bring the desired information, more powerful weapons were brought against the blushing damsel.

They were all so sure the favored swain was Oscar Radford. There must have been a lover's quarrel. What was it about? Who was to blame? Of course *he* was, but—well, it seemed a pity, though Mr. Cameron was awful nice, and so handsome, and—and—

Della, dark, witchingly pretty with her rosy cheeks, great black eyes and short, curling hair that almost defied restraint; with her diminutive, yet perfectly rounded and proportioned figure; with her rich crimson dress, relieved at throat and wrists by white lace—a peculiar dress for a bride, but one which became her style of beauty far too perfectly for one to find fault with it—seemed feverishly gay and happy as she adroitly fenced with her inquisitors, giving them plenty of words but precious little satisfaction. She seemed to think their curiosity only assumed, only part of the badinage so often used on such occasions, and unworthy a serious denial.

So well did she play her part, and so nobly did the pitied Oscar Radford abet her efforts in that direction, that before long the subject was abandoned. Surely there must have been a mistake, but they had been running the wrong way of the trail. If jilted or jilter, Oscar Radford would hardly be among the guests.

Then, as the afternoon wore away and changed to evening, there was still more cause for wonder and whispered comments on the part of the gossip-loving. Who knew anything of Fergus Cameron? What could be detaining him so late? Why, it was little short of an open insult, not only to the bride elect, but to the company in general.

The bridegroom was part of the pageant—part of the treat! He had no right to keep himself secluded until the very last moment, as though he held himself too high and mighty for the gaze of common folk! He was in duty bound to show himself, to make himself agreeable, to afford them a fair opportunity for commenting on his "get-up," on the manner in which he carried himself in this critical emergency.

John Dement began to scowl as few men save himself could scowl. Rough and gnarly, blunt and off-hand, the same now that he was when but a cowboy on wages, the rancher was proud as the best at heart. He felt the slight even more keenly than did the bride, for she could laugh and chat without bending an ear to listen, or casting a covert glance out through the open windows over the rolling plain beyond.

"What's keepin' the critter, think?" muttered Dement, stooping to her ear.

"I'm not his keeper—as yet!" was the soft response, but with a glowing light in the lustrous black eyes that contrasted sharply with her smiling lips and happy looks.

"Ef I thought he was holdin' off o' his own free will, I'd—"

The rest was lost behind his grizzled beard and tight clinched teeth, but something in his eyes betrayed that his words contained anything but a blessing on the tardy bridegroom.

"There is time enough, father," she replied more naturally, shrinking a little, as she always did when she met her father in this savage temper. "Something has detained him longer than he intended. He will come presently, and bring his excuse with him."

"It's got to be a mighty good one, then! The hull gang's whisperin' an' snickerin' like idjots over the fun—they call it!" growled the burly rancher as he turned away, smoothing his face as best he could, forgetting how plainly the red glow in his eyes was betraying his irritation and growing doubts.

With others, Oscar Radford noticed this whispered interchange, and like others he had no difficulty in interpreting it aright. The eyes of love are very keen, despite the old adage, and Oscar Radford loved Della Dement with an adoration that passeth words.

He knew that the bride elect was suffering far more acutely than she permitted her smiling face to betray, and sore as was his own heart over ruined hopes, he pitied her deeply. For the moment he forgot his bitter longing for revenge; forgot how he had sworn to make her repent in tears of blood for her cruelty in throwing him over for a mere nothing, forgot everything save her suffering.

A gayly dressed damsel just then arose from the organ which formed almost the only article of luxury in the bare old ranch, and with burning blushes retreated to a corner with a tall, supple cowboy whose every word and every action plainly betrayed his hopelessly smitten condition.

Oscar Radford crossed the room and bent over the bride-elect, his face wearing a grave smile, his hand extended as though assured his request would not be denied as he spoke:

"One more tune, if only to oblige an old comrade, Miss Della. There will be time, I think, unless you force me to waste the minutes in pleading for the boon."

The two pair of jetty eyes met for a moment, and the saucy retort which was quivering on Della's tongue died away without birth. She was used to reading those magnetic orbs, and she read their meaning aright now.

"You are very kind," she murmured, so faintly that no ears save his caught the sounds.

She rose and accompanied him to the instrument. He turned over the music, apparently wholly absorbed in searching for some favorite tune, but at the same time he whispered, softly:

"This suspense is killing you, Della! Give me permission to go in quest of Mr. Cameron. I will bring him to you, or—"

With a smile that was only for the rest of the guests, the bride-elect caught the music-book from his hands, herself rapidly turning over the leaves, her parted lips motionless, but the words issuing:

"He will come without my sending, if he comes at all. Still, I thank you. You mean well, I know."

As she struck the first chord Oscar Radford muttered hoarsely:

"If you know anything, you know that, even yet, I would die for you! I would die to save you a single one of the pangs you are now suffering! It is a base, unmanly insult, which—"

"You forget yourself, Mr. Radford!"

Sharp and incautiously loud came this interruption, but the skillful fingers succeeded in drowning the sounds to all ears save his.

His face pale as marble, his lips firmly compressed, his jetty brows a thought contracted, Oscar Radford drew back a pace with arms folded closely over his swelling chest. To all appearance he seemed solely intent on listening to the deep, rolling notes of the organ. In reality, he was fighting almost the hardest fight of his life.

There was a mad impulse within him which urged him to make one more effort to retrieve the precious prize his passionate temper had lost him. He was tempted to clasp her to his bosom and madly defy her father, her own murdered love, all the company to separate them. She had been his for so long. She had been his so entirely. And in losing her, he seemed to be losing all his future. What matter, then, if he lost his faint hopes of heaven as well?

It was a sad story, this of theirs, and none the less sad for being so common.

Both were quick-tempered and passionate, and though each felt that life without the other—at least in those earlier days—would be far more bitter than death; their quarrels had been frequent and almost fierce, only to be made up after a night of mutual misery, until this last unfortunate outbreak.

Della Dement had two open lovers among her numerous secret admirers. Not a cowboy on the vast range but had, sooner or later, fallen a helpless victim to her saucy charms, but only these two were of a rank which justified them in aspiring to her hand and fortune.

Oscar Radford and Fergus Cameron were both owners of valuable cattle-ranches in the favored "Pan-handle," and both in a fair way to become cattle-kings. Both fell in love with the only child of widowed John Dement, immediately after he brought her home from an Eastern school, where nearly all her life had been passed.

Fergus Cameron was the one most favored by John Dement, probably because he afforded the strongest contrast to the rough, choleric rancher. Gay, laughing, light-hearted under any and all circumstances, the blonde-haired Scotchman quickly won his way into the good graces of his surly neighbor—for their ranches were divided by barely fifty miles of ground, and that is neighborly in Texas.

Possibly because of the natural perversity of the fair sex, Della shrugged her dainty shoulders when Dement declared that she could not please him better than by "taking up" with Cameron, and averred that unless she could please herself in choosing a future lord and master she certainly would not try to please any one else. And so, not a little to the discontent of John Dement, the little witch smiled more and more upon dark-faced Oscar Radford.

Fergus Cameron smiled as of yore, even after he proposed and was rejected by the damsel. He smiled as he declared that while she remained single he should continue to hope; and when she should marry, if she would not wed with him, he would still wait, and if ever fate determined she should become a widow, he would then renew his suit. And smiling still, he continued to visit the Dement Ranch, never departing without once more asking her to take pity on him.

And Della, despite herself, could not treat him other than as the jolly, frank, true friend he showed himself, even after she told him of her engagement to Oscar Radford.

Oscar did not look on the friendship with the same eyes, however, and this furnished the stock and staple of their many quarrels. He finally demanded that Della formally and forever banish Fergus Cameron, and grew fiercer as she tried to laugh away his jealousy, until he roughly bade her choose between them, once for all.

Never mind the details. Both were hot and hasty. There were hard words from both—words hard to forgive and harder yet to forget—and when Oscar Radford rode furiously away through the night, all was over between them. With the tong, Della picked up the engagement ring from the floor where Oscar had crushed it beneath his heel, and threw it into the fireplace, burying it beneath the cold ashes.

And then, when Fergus Cameron smilingly repeated his offer of his hand on the next day, Della accepted him!

The elated lover struck while the iron was hot, and before he parted with her that evening, the wedding-day was set, and invitations were already ready on their way to the "neighbors."

One of them met Oscar Radford as he was riding back to humbly ask her forgiveness, and after the first few moments of stunned yet keen fury, he seemed to turn into a living, moving, breathing statue.

He went on and asked for Della, as usual, but he met her only in company with her father. Della was cold and seemingly unmoved, but John Dement was openly, coarsely triumphant. He bluntly declared that he was delighted that his little girl had recovered from her silly infatuation while it was yet time. And he added:

"You know me, Mr. Radford. I'm a man of mighty few words, but them words come with the bark on. I don't like you. Ef Dell hed married you, I'd a' turned her out o' my heart an' buried her mem'ry deeper than a grave! Now you've broke off, you kin git! An' I reckon it'd suit best all round, ef you was to stay git, too!"

"But you will come to—that day, Mr. Radford?" softly uttered Della, flushing warmly, but steadily meeting his piercing gaze.

"I will come to the wedding, if I am alive, since you ask it, Miss Dement," he replied, then turned and strode away.

He had kept his word, and had been among the earliest to reach the Dement Ranch, though long before the fated day came, Della learned to dread his coming, to hope and pray that he might stay away.

And now, as he stood at her shoulder, his face pale as marble, his heart throbbing so violently that he could hear its pulsations even through the music, no one could guess the truth. To the eyes that were curiously watching them both, all seemed calm and placid. Surely they had never loved, even though their engagement had been a public secret.

Even John Dement did not give them a second glance, so wholly was he occupied in stifling his growing rage against the tardy bridegroom.

What was keeping him? He should have been here long hours ago, according to Western custom. Surely he was not such an infernal scoundrel as to seek such a miserable revenge for the many slights Della had put upon him? Surely nothing had happened to—

For the first time the thought of death flashed across the brain of the thoroughly irritated rancher, and involuntarily he glanced toward Oscar Radford. Only to scowl and toss back his shaggy mane impatiently. That was not the face of an assassin. Strongly as he disliked the young stockman he was forced to admit as much.

Outside the uneasiness was waxing stronger, and the cowboys belonging to the Dement Ranch were almost ready to take horse to dash off in an effort to solve the mystery.

"What's got into the boss, anyhow?" muttered one, with an impatient glance toward the lighted windows. "Ef he hain't got 'ligion mighty sudden, he'd be rippin' an' a-chargin' like a bobtail bull in a swarm o' buffalo gnats! Why don't he sing out fer somebody to straddle critter an' round up that durned Scotty!"

"You go ax him why, Pete," suggested a comrade, blandly. "He Cain't do no wuss then snap the nose off o' your face, an' that'd be a 'provement wu't takin' a little trouble fer!"

"I'll give him ten minnits more law, an' then ef he dont show up, I'm goin' to find out the why an' wharfor," grimly muttered Melancholy Mike, with a defiant nod.

"Mebbe Sally'll go 'long with ye, Mike," grinned John Dumpling, with a nod over his

shoulder. "I jes' ketched a glimp' o' the gal back yen' way, lookin' fer somebody or somethin'. So-long, pard!" with a chuckling laugh as the fat cowboy hastily trotted off toward the rear of the building.

"It's a shame an' a disgrace an' I wouldn't treat a dog so if I was a man which I'm glad I ain't nor never will be!" vehemently declared Sarah as Melancholy Mike ran fairly up against her as he hastily turned the corner.

"I didn't mean it, Sally—cross my heart ef I known you was so nigh!" meekly muttered the lovelorn cowboy, mistaking the cause of her passionate and punctuationless outburst.

"It's bad enough to marry a mau, massy knows, but to marry one that don't think enough of a body to come to his own wedding is ten times wuss an' more too!" sniffed the indignant virgin. "Ketch me!"

Melancholy Mike did catch her in an audacious embrace, but once more the cup of joy was dashed from his lips before he could so much as take a single sip of its contents.

A loud shout came from the front, and then the words:

"Thar he comes! But look how! Good God! What's up?"

Sally broke away from her lover and rushed around the corner. One stare through the clear moonlight, and then a wild scream broke from her pallid lips, drawn forth by that strange spectacle.

And out from the ranch flocked the startled wedding guests to witness the sight. And surely never groom came to bride in such plight!

CHAPTER II.

LUCIFER AND HIS IMPS.

ROB ROY RANCH with all its belongings, was a very comfortable little competence for a comparatively young man. Its thousands of broad acres were admirably located as to water privileges, and even this early in the cattle history of the Pan-handle, had doubled in money value did the fortunate owner choose to sell.

That owner was Fergus Cameron, the tall, handsome, blonde-haired son of the land o' cakes and ale.

The ranch proper was a substantial building, with more strength than elegance, of more comfort than grace, since it was modeled after the old Spanish style, being in shape like unto a mammoth dry goods box, flat topped, with a hollow square or courtyard in the center.

Around were scattered the usual outbuildings and corrals, the whole forming quite a little settlement.

Three good horses were hitched to the rack before the door which closed the arched passage leading to the inner court, and several cowboys were lounging around after a lazy fashion, brightening up a little as two young men came from the ranch proper.

These were neighboring stockmen, whom Fergus Cameron had invited to bear him company to the Dement Ranch, both young, both "well fixed" as to this world's goods, and both wearing looks of laughing impatience as they glanced back over their shoulders to make sure their laggard host was coming.

"Last call and final warning, Cameron! If you daily another minute we're off, to clear our skirts of blame!" cried Edward McKeever.

"And beg the bonny bride to choose one more worthy of her rare graces," chimed in Fred Marble, with a half-frown. "For shame, man! Ten years penance won't replace you in the good graces of the wedding guests, even if the all-but-divine Della can forgive your tardiness!"

"Time enough and to spare, my impatient lads," came a laughing voice, followed shortly after by Fergus Cameron himself, drawing on his riding gloves. "Are we riding cripples, that half a day is insufficient to cover fifty miles?"

"If that was all, it wouldn't be so bad," muttered Marble, with a slight frown as he leaped into the saddle. "You know the unwritten laws well enough, Ferg."

"Unwritten let them remain for all of me," laughed Cameron, turning with hand on pommeled to add: "Dick, I leave you in charge here until I return, or send you word."

"You're goin' to fetch the new mistress home, boss?"

"In time, of course, but for awhile we'll stop at the new ranch," was the reply, Cameron adding with a gay laugh as a shade fell over the bronzed face of the cowboy: "You're thinking of the spree you're missing, Dick, but it can't be helped. You know the work on hand. You are the only one I can trust to take my place on such short notice. Perform that work, and you'll not be the loser. So-long, now!"

"Time, too!" muttered McKeever, frowning. "We'll be cut for this unpardonable breach of manners, and good-by to the dance my lady fair has promised me!"

"Ned's right, Cameron," seriously uttered Marble, as the trio gave their animals free rein and dashed rapidly away through the warm sun. "Do our prettiest, it will be late in the afternoon before we can reach the ranch, and you should have been there all day."

"To be placed on exhibition?"

"You're in Texas, Ferg. You know how the

people will look at it. They'll pronounce you stuck-up!"

"Precisely what I object to, dear fellow," laughed Cameron, deftly lighting a cigar without checking the speed of his good horse. "I'm too modest to be stuck-up, as you hint, for a spectacle. Think of it! A man of my tender sensibilities parading to and fro, turning round about and posing in order that the rustic beauties and cowboy gawkies might make a mental inventory of my charms, natural and artificial! I couldn't do it! I'd catch fire from my own blushes, or else mortally offend the spectators by laughing in their faces!"

"It's part of the penalty you must pay for your conquest, Cameron; and you hadn't ought to grumble," gravely retorted McKeever.

"There isn't a man in the Pan-handle who wouldn't stand in that pillory for a month, if by doing it he could fill your shoes, Ferg!"

"And you have more to think of than yourself, remember," added the other, still more gravely. "Of course it's you for it, Cameron, but Miss Della will have to take at least part of the punishment."

The Scotchman stared from one mentor to the other, his big blue eyes widely opened, his smile fading away as though he was just beginning to appreciate their seriousness.

"Why, one would almost think you fellows meant it!" he exclaimed, with a half laugh.

"Of course we mean it," was the testy retort. "Haven't we been spurring you up all day? And now you try to play innocence!"

"I took it for simple chaff, such as all smart fellows like you think part of the game on such occasions."

"You'll find it bitter earnest, old fellow! They'll send you to Coventry, depend on it. I only hope they won't include Miss Dement in the sentence."

For several miles the trio rode on in silence, each face grave, and that of Fergus Cameron even troubled. But this could not last long in one of his disposition. The banished smile returned, and his eyes filled with a roguish light as he exclaimed:

"We've got to redeem our credit, that's flat! And you'll forgive me my sin if I bring all hands out with flying colors!"

"What quirk have you got in that rattlebrain of yours now, you graceless sinner?" laughed Marble, curiously.

"You'll stand by me in my defense? You won't go back on my yarn?"

"Cross my heart," laughed Marble, adding: "and I'll cross Mac's, if he don't do it of his own free will!"

"Better a lie than the truth, in such a case, if it is really necessary. What is it?"

"Prince Lucifer and all his imps!" chuckled Cameron. "We were taken foul, and lost all save honor. How'll that work?"

His hearty laugh was returned, and the trio clasped hands from the saddle as their animals bore them rapidly along. Both of his companions caught quickly at the idea shadowed forth by that enigmatical speech, and were at no loss as to its meaning.

"Good boy, Ferg!" cried Marble, all shadows vanishing behind a broad grin. "You furnish the details, and we'll back them up. It's got to be a smooth yarn, though."

"And we must be letter-perfect in all the little details, for we'll have to stand a powerful inquisition. What sort of a fellow shall we make the Prince? Suppose some of the company are personally acquainted with the gentleman?"

"They'll never admit as much, be sure!" laughed Cameron. "And if we don't hit the mark very close, what matter? There's a dozen different descriptions of the rascal floating about the country, so another false one won't matter much."

And so, as they rode rapidly along toward the Dement Ranch, the three ranchers merrily trifled with fate, arranging the details of a mock ambuscade and capture, while at the same time there were those in the trail before them who would turn their idle jest to stern reality.

It was not difficult to patch up such a story as Cameron suggested. At that date it would have been a hard matter to tell a tale too preposterous for belief as long as the Prince Lucifer figured prominently in it.

Wherever horses and cattle are raised in abundance, there will the stock-thieves gather for spoil, and the Pan-handle was no exception to this rule. The lay of the ground was especially favorable for their getting clear with booty when once in their possession, either by running into the Indian Territory, into New Mexico, or by the operation of brand-burning, and afterward selling to a "fence."

Suddenly a new and brilliant star shot across that horizon, but not to disappear for good and all. Instead, there was every indication that he "had come to stay."

And as the days went on, this new-comer, Prince Lucifer, and his Night-Imps became a staple subject for conversation. Theirs were the boldest raids and the most successful; theirs the trail hardest to follow and the easiest to lose. Indeed, some were soon ready to swear that the head rascal had more than idle fancy to base his title upon, that he was none other

Rob Roy Ranch.

than the original Lucifer, come back to earth for the purpose of ruining honest men; ruining them in their pockets by running off their stock, and weighting down their souls by countless curses his cunningly bold robberies called forth from angry lips.

Now here, now there, striking in swift succession and many miles apart, until one could almost take oath that the infernal fiends were at work, or else that Lucifer had several doubles. And always with success, up to date.

Many a cunning trap had been set for the marauding band, but only to fail. And while a rancher was watching for the thieves at one of his neighbors', the chances were even that the Prince was taking his pick of that same rancher's herds.

That was before the Stock Growers' Association had extended so far from the more thickly settled portion of Texas, but something of the sort had been organized in the Pan-handle, and the three men who were laughing over the plot to cover the bridegroom's ignorance or thoughtlessness, were prominent members of the order.

As the three plotted, they slackened their pace. Now that they had a plausible excuse for their tardiness, neither was in any particular haste to reach the Dement Ranch many hours before that appointed for the ceremony.

"I'll be spared so much quizzing, and you won't have to wait so long for the sport," smiled Fergus Cameron.

"And the Prince wouldn't let us escape before," laughed Fred Marble, hugely relishing the jest, even though it would seem to be altogether at their expense.

It was now well along in the afternoon, and the trail they followed led along through a scattered tract of timber, where the shade was refreshingly cool after their long exposure to the hot sun.

"We couldn't find a better place than this for the ambuscade, to my notion," laughed Marble, hat in hand as he wiped his heated brow. "Lucifer has shown himself a fellow of rare discrimination so far in his public history, and of course he isn't idiot enough to spring an ambush without cover in the daytime. I move we make this the scene of our frightful adventure!"

"Second the motion," laughed McKeever.

"What ho! Lucifer! Appear and claim your trembling victims!" cried Cameron, recklessly gay for the moment—only to draw rein with a sharp cry of amazement as a dark figure leaped out from behind a dense bush alongside the trail, lifting one arm and sternly crying:

"You called me, and I am here!" with a mocking laugh, as the three men instinctively reined their snorting, trembling steeds backward.

Not one of the trio seemed capable of lifting a hand or grasping a weapon, their surprise was so complete. They could scarcely believe the evidence of their own senses. But an instant before they were laughingly summoning Lucifer, and now he stood before them, a low and mocking laugh parting his lips.

A grim and even startling sight, under the peculiar circumstances, too!

Of medium size and build, so far as could be told through the half-disguise furnished by the cloak that hung from his shoulders, partly lifted on his right arm as his gloved forefinger quivered before their faces, imparting a trembling, waving motion to the cloth that increased its fanciful resemblance to the dark wings which one associates with the fiend, as by instinct.

Of his face one could say still less, since it was covered to the junction of throat with shoulders by a red mask that seemed to cling tightly to the face beneath, moving with its motions as a second skin, having a faintly transparent appearance, as though formed of fine wire or thin gauze.

A pair of jetty mustaches curled upward, and a pointed beard decked the chin, just as one gazes upon in the picture of Mephistopheles, while short, pointed horns rose from his temples.

"What! not one word?" the strange being cried, sneeringly. "Good and true servants of Satan as ye have proved yourselves, you are stricken dumb with awe when he sends his lieutenant to answer your call!"

Fergus Cameron was no coward, and these words seemed to sting him to fury. With an incredibly swift motion he flashed forth a revolver and covered the mocking outlaw, as he said:

"Man or devil, take that!"

The hammer fell, but no explosion followed. Lucifer stood motionless, making no effort to defend himself, nor to frustrate the attempt on his life, a mocking laugh bubbling from his lips.

"Would you try to kill the devil, good son?"

"Shoot him—riddle him, lads!" grated Cameron, working his revolver as rapidly as his nervous finger could work the double action.

And though now three revolvers were clicking rapidly, not a single explosion followed! Surely this was the foul fiend himself, or else their weapons had been tampered with!

"Curses on the hand that doctored them!" hissed Cameron, hurling the useless weapon at the head of the masked man. "Down with him, lads! Crush him under your hoofs! Use cold steel, or—"

With a swift motion Prince Lucifer evaded the missile, leaping back a few paces and flinging up both arms, with a sudden gesture.

As he did so, the three riders were caught and dragged over the haunches of their steeds with a shock that almost drove the breath from their bodies and sense from their brains.

They struggled faintly, but without avail. There seemed to be a full score of malicious imps swarming over them, beating and kicking, biting and tearing. And, through it all, they could hear the mellow, yet jarring laugh of Prince Lucifer, the demon with the red mask.

Mufflers were wound about their eyes and mouths, stifling their maledictions, and then they felt themselves lifted from the ground to be borne rapidly along through the shade. They tried to struggle, to twist themselves free, but vainly. Although until then they had not realized the fact, they were bound hand and foot.

This enforced journey was but a short one; then they were dropped to the ground with their backs propped against tree-trunks. The mufflers were removed from their heads, and the power of sight granted them.

Before them, with arms folded over his chest, with bowed head, gazing at them with a sneering smile, stood Prince Lucifer. Behind and on either side could be seen their captors, their faces hidden behind their masks, their forms muffled in dark cloaks, the disguise rendered all the more perfect from the manner in which they folded their arms.

"You called on me in idle jest, Fergus Cameron," said the Prince, his voice hard and cold, "but I appear to you in bitter earnest. You have kept me waiting long, but there are those who shall wait yet longer for the coming of the bridegroom."

"You mean to murder me, you fiend!" grated Cameron, throwing all his powers into an effort to burst his bonds, but vainly.

"Not murder, nor just yet," was the retort, in the same icy tones, paying no attention to the struggles of the rancher. "I mean to read you a lesson, and to give a warning to your fellow schemers. After that—well, those who decline to accept the warning will have to rue it."

"If not murder, then you can only mean robbery," sullenly retorted the captive, his blue eyes flashing hotly. "Take what you can, give me any message which you want delivered, then set us free. I've no time to waste in silly fooling."

"I have taken far too many pains to capture you to be moved by your impatience. If you ever go free you can congratulate yourself on a better fate than you deserve. If you had me in your power, as I have you, what would be my fate?"

Fergus Cameron glanced quickly into those dark eyes, but the hot speech that quivered upon his lips died away without audible utterance. It might not be wise to speak too openly, even on invitation.

Prince Lucifer laughed, sneeringly, contemptuously as it seemed.

"Bah! men talk of your daring, and even you have boasted of what you would do if only kind fortune should bring us together. I am before you now, Fergus Cameron, but your tongue is dumb. You look daggers, but you dare do no more. A Cameron—and a coward!"

"You lie in your throat when you say so!" cried Cameron, despite the warning murmurings of his cooler blooded companions in misfortune. "Have your Imps cast off my bonds, and I'll make you eat those words, with only the weapons nature gave me!"

Prince Lucifer laughed, softly, musically, almost pleasantly.

"I can pierce your thick skin, then? There is a trace of gunpowder in your composition? Good!" with a sudden fierceness that chilled the blood of those who listened to his speech. "You will suffer something, then, even if I turn you free with your life. You wince at the term coward, and can feel shame when it comes home to yourself. That is better than I dared hope for!"

With an effort Cameron calmed himself, at least to outward seeming.

"If you set me free, we will meet again. Then the world shall see on whose brow coward should be printed."

"That meeting will be sooner than you anticipate, perhaps," with a short, meaning laugh. "How it will result, remains to be seen. Now, if you please, we'll descend to sober business."

"Cut it short, curse you!" snapped Cameron, sullenly.

"Answer my questions promptly and to the point, then. You are head and front of this new Vigilance Committee?"

"If you mean the organization for putting down and exterminating all such infernal thieves as you are and—"

With a swift motion Prince Lucifer advanced and tapped the irate captive across the lips with his gloved hand.

"Keep to the point and avoid personalities,

my dear fellow, if you value that neck of yours," he said, sharply, stepping back to his former position. "A plain answer, yes or no."

"I am one of the officers, but not the chief."

Hoarsely, slowly came the words, and there was a reddish glow in the blue eyes that menaced the outlaw with bitter revenge should the tables ever be turned.

"I believe you lie, but let it pass. As an officer your message will have weight enough to be considered, no doubt. Now listen:

"I am Prince Lucifer, and these are some of my Imps. We have come to the Pan-handle to stay, at least until we have made enough money to go away and pass for honest men again without having to descend to hard labor. Until that time comes, we mean to tax all opulent aristocrats like yourself and fellows. If you are sensible, and don't interfere too closely with our little tricks, well and good. If you do, then so much the worse for you, in pocket and body."

"We're to stand by without a kick while you run off the pick of our stock?" ejaculated Fred Marble, startled out of his enforced composure.

"Better that than worse," retorted Prince Lucifer, turning upon him. "Do you wish me to direct my conversation to you instead of Cameron?"

"Not for the world!" with a nervous laugh. "I'm dumb as a clam."

"You have more than you need while we have less," coolly added Prince Lucifer, turning back to Cameron. "Act sensibly, and we'll divide our favors so that no one man will suffer very extensively. Play the fool as you've begun, and we'll stick to business until there's not a hoof, split or whole, left on the range of a man who belongs to your bloodhound organization."

The chief of the Imps paused, with the air of a man who has said his say, and Fergus Cameron, with an assumed surprise, uttered:

"Is that all? You are too modest in your demands, you thief!"

Prince Lucifer paid no attention to the fierce epithet, but coolly added:

"I am simply giving you a warning to deliver to your fellows. Time enough to fill in the details after they refuse to act on the good advice I am giving through you. But if you insist—listen:

"Your every word and movement is brought to me without delay. I know of your plots and plans almost as soon as you do who concoct them, and in ample time to frustrate them after the fashion I deem best. I know the name and rank of every member of the order, and will know the prime movers in any blow that is aimed at me and mine. On their heads will fall the heaviest blow in retaliation."

"Tell your fellows this: Tell them that if they play with fire, they must expect to scorch their fingers. They began the fight, but I will end it, and when I am forced to strike at human game, be sure I'll strike to kill!"

"Now as for your release. I might serve you as you have often sworn you would like to serve me and my Imps. I might send you to your bride with your ears cropped. I might send you to her minus a nose and with gory lips; for all of these you have threatened me with before you applied the finishing touch in the shape of a well-greased noose."

"For this once, I'll be more merciful. Your dainty bride shall receive you sound in wind and limb, with not a disfiguring mark on your handsome face so far as I am concerned. If any accident should befall you after I dismiss you, blame the proper cause."

"Imps! fall to work! you know what to do!"

Three of the outlaws brought up the captured horses, and held them in waiting, while their fellows pounced upon the captives and slit their clothes to ribbons, leaving their nakedness concealed only by fluttering rags. Dirt was torn up and mixed with spittle, then daubed in streaks and blotches over the faces of the three men, with a liberal application, mixed with grass and twigs, to their bared heads. Then they were lifted into their saddles and bound firmly in place with ropes.

Marble and McKeever were seated after the usual fashion but poor Cameron was faced to the rear, a lasso looped about his neck, the other end being used in tying his hands behind him. A bandage was placed over his mouth, stifling his voice as he struggled to free himself.

The other men were also bound with their hands behind them, but their mouths were left free, and with a mocking laugh Prince Lucifer placed the doubled reins between their teeth, saying:

"It may come handy in case your nags take a notion to stray from the right trail. And then, thus employed, the recording scribe will have considerable less writing to do on your accounts!"

Turning from them, he spoke to Fergus Cameron:

"I would not have treated you quite so harshly, dear fellow, nor sent you to your dainty bride in so miserable a plight, only for your own gasconading tongue. You were preparing a lie against me and my precious Imps to cover your own laziness—you start?" with a low, malicious laugh. "Does that savor of the lower

regions? Bah! you were so busy making up your romance that you failed to see me as I shadowed you clear from the edge of the timber. See what a simple solution!"

A motion of his hand, and the Imps led the horses back to the trail, heading them in the direction of the Dement Ranch.

"My best regards to the bride, dear fellow!" laughed Prince Lucifer as he signed his men to set them free. "Who knows? I may even be a guest at the wedding, and salute the charming Della! Fare thee well, my beloved! Keep to the straight and narrow way, and stray not to one side nor the other, lest a pitfall bewray thee, and so bring tears of weary longing to the lustrous eyes of the dainty bride, for the handsome groom who cometh not to the bridal!"

And as they rode slowly away, the mocking laugh of Prince Lucifer followed them.

CHAPTER III.

A RARE GIFT FOR A BRIDE.

AND this was the spectacle which greeted the astonished wedding guests, dimly seen at first, owing to the bright lights which they had just left, but with the passage of each moment growing clearer and more distinct under the silvery beams of the nearly full moon.

Half a mile away, coming into sudden prominence as they rose from the gentle depression in the plain, three horses and their riders were silhouetted against the horizon. As though to afford a fairer view, the animals halted, the two in the lead turning slightly as the third pressed past them for a few feet before halting.

"Dead sure it is!" cried one of the cowboys, breaking the sudden silence which had fallen over the company for an instant. "That's his Snowbank hoss, as a blind man could see!"

"An' that's him, turned nose to tail!"

With a hoarse, angry roar, John Dement plunged through the crowd at the door and dashed toward the stables, thundering:

"Do something, ye chattering apes o' perdition! Ketch up an' foller me, hot-foot!"

The spell was broken, and each man rushed for his horse, losing no time in equipping them, but leaping upon bare backs and trusting to halters for bridle reins and bit. In some few instances with lamentable lack of success, the half-wild animals rearing, bucking and plunging as though fresh from an over-indulgence in the crazing loco-weed, but enough dashed after their leader out over the plain to the spot where the bridegroom and his chosen mates had made their appearance.

"What the devil does all this mean, anyhow?" savagely cried John Dement as he neared the uneasy animals.

"Look out—they're going to bolt!" cried Fred Marble in a strained, unnatural voice, as the horses tossed their heads and began to separate, seemingly frightened by that fierce voice, or else taking alarm at the charging cavalcade.

Bolt they did, and for a few moments the scene was excitingly ludicrous as Dement and his men sought to effect their capture, racing here and there, grasping at the flying bridle-reins when near enough, only to be foiled as often by the dodging animals.

"Confound it, man! use your rope!" gasped McKeever, as a swift whirl of his steed swung his helpless body over sideways until the tight bonds caused him exquisite torture.

"Make sure of Cameron first!" generously cried Marble, bearing in mind the still more helpless condition of his friend.

Though several of the horses in chase were saddled, by a curious mischance there was not a single lasso attached to them, and the captures were only effected by surrounding the frightened creatures and then closing in from all sides until a strong hand could catch a bridle-rein.

By this time John Dement had cooled down a little as he recognized the utterly helpless condition of the man whose tardiness, or worse, he had been cursing in his heart for hours past. He said nothing until his own knife cut the gag from Fergus Cameron's lips, until the noose was cast off from about his neck and his limbs set at liberty. Then, lowering the cramped man to the ground, he pressed a liquor flask upon him, saying:

"Drink hearty, lad. It'll do ye good, an'—"

But Cameron averted his face and pushed away the flask, saying in husky, uncertain tones:

"Della don't like—give me water—my throat is parched!"

"Water, ye lazy-heels!" snarled Dement, turning his burning eyes upon the curious cowboys. "Fetch drink in a hurry, durn ye!"

"Don't upset the flask, for the love of choking humanity, Dement!" pleaded Marble, tumbling from his horse as his limbs were set free. "I'm not so particular about my breath, and—"

"Play fair, pard, whatever ye do!" huskily muttered McKeever, licking his parched lips. "It'll take a whole cask to remove the taste of that infernal leather—ugh!"

"You kin talk glib enough," said Dement, turning toward the two ranchers who were speedily draining the flask. "What does all this mean? Who done it, au' why?"

"Prince Lucifer and his Imps—may the doors of Hades open to receive them mighty soon, and

then become hermetically sealed behind them!" ejaculated Fred Marble, with a fervor which was not at all counterfeited.

"Keep them back," muttered Cameron, harshly, as he glanced toward the ranch, from whence quite a crowd was hurrying in their direction. "Don't let any more see—not *her* anyway."

"Good Lord—yes!" spluttered Marble, sneaking around to the further side of the little group. "Is this a rig for a wedding? Could we shine in a ballroom? Keep them back, or I'll sink into the ground without stopping to bore a hole!"

John Dement stalked forward and halted the curious crowd, his voice hard and more than ordinarily peremptory.

"Go back to the ranch, all o' you. They ain't nothin' you kin do here, an' you'll know all 'bout it so much the sooner fer not crowdin' in whar they ain't no room."

The onward rush was checked, and John Dement improved the opportunity.

"They's bin dirty tricks played, but no harm done. Go back as I bid ye, an' you shell know everythin' that's happened, girls. An' you, gents, try to make out enough clothes 'mongst ye fer to kiver the nakedness o' three men decent, will ye?"

The cowboys returned with water, and after a long, hearty draught, the owner of the Rob Roy Ranch declared himself all right again.

Blankets were wrapped around them, concealing their dilapidated garments and mud-marked faces as much as possible, then the three men mounted their horses and rode on to the ranch, where soap and water, combs and brushes, added to a liberal contribution of garments by the laughing guests, quickly put them in presentable condition once more.

While this transformation was being effected, countless questions were poured upon the three, but Cameron was strangely reserved, McKeever was sullen, while Marble, feverishly gay, parried one and all with more wit than truth.

John Dement was not among those who betrayed such open curiosity, though there was an uneasy light in his eyes, an unwonted nervousness in his demeanor as he hustled around and did all that lay in his power to provide for the luckless trio. It was as though he expected some heavy blow to descend upon him or his, against which he was powerless to act.

"You shall hear all, gentlemen," gravely said Fergus Cameron, as he completed his toilet, turning toward the house, "but the first explanation is due Miss Dement."

"That's right, in course," muttered Dement, as he started to the young man's side and grasped his arm a little nervously. "But I wouldn't say too much, lad, ef I was you. She's had a hard pull of it, 'long o' them mischievous gals, an' your not comin' on time. It's hard fer a young gal like her, ye know, an'—"

"She is your daughter, John Dement, and she is to be my wife," was the gentler, but still firm reply. "She will not be frightened at what is past and gone, and for the future my good right hand can protect her easily enough. She must know that it was not my fault, this delay."

"An' then she'd be sure to hear it all, anyhow!" muttered the uneasy father, adding more briskly:

"Yes, it's best you make your excuses to Dell, I reckon, lad. She kin see you're all right, an' the rest won't matter so much."

Still he kept close to the side of the bridegroom, his dark, forbidding face keeping the curious fair ones at a greater distance than would have suited them had they only the gay, likeable young Scotchman to encounter.

Della Dement was strangely pale for her, though seemingly calm and wholly at ease as Fergus Cameron paused before her, gently bowing over her little hand as he pressed it warmly.

"I am more sinned against than sinning, Della, but if my delay has caused you pain or annoyance, I shall always feel a guilty wretch," he murmured in tones too low for others to catch.

"It was not your fault, I am sure. Something has happened—"

"Which that cuss to the kentry, Prince Lucifer an' his Imps, was at the bottom o' the happenin', too!" impulsively broke in John Dement, his grizzled brows contracting over his flaming eyes, until it seemed as though they must catch fire from them.

That interruption was excuse sufficient for the curious guests, and they immediately flocked around so closely that further private explanations were out of the question. For a brief space Cameron seemed impatient, but then the frown faded from his brow and he became, outwardly at least, once more the gay, light-hearted being who had grown such a favorite with the majority of those present.

"I surrender at discretion, ladies," he said, laughingly, glancing around the room. "You shall hear my confession, but I must have the support of my two comrades in misfortune to keep me in countenance. The ordeal would be too much for me without them to share your ridicule."

Disagreeable as the task must have been, Fergus Cameron did not attempt to shirk it.

He knew that nothing but a full and circumstantial account would satisfy the lady guests, and as the shortest route out he began at the beginning.

Not that he told the whole truth, for that would seriously lessen the sympathy they all desired, but while he avoided a positive lie, he left it to be inferred that they had set out from Rob Roy Ranch in ample time to reach their destination by noon at the latest.

Marble and McKeever drew a breath of relief and interchanged glances as this critical point was successfully passed, then meekly hung their heads, looking like veritable martyrs as Cameron detailed their shameful trials of that day.

With a quiet, dry humor that took much of the sting out of the affair, Fergus told how they were surprised and captured.

"No doubt our guns were doctored by some cunning hand, possibly in my own ranch, but at that I can only guess. For Prince Lucifer forgot to return them to us when he kissed us good-by—poor fellow!"

"Is that all?" cried one fair damsel, disappointedly.

"We thought it quite sufficient, I assure you," bowed Cameron.

"With a bit or two to spare, at that!" interposed Marble, with a wry grimace as he shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Then they just caught you to let you go again?"

"Would you have them keep us prisoners forever?"

"Of course not, for then there would be no wedding. But what did he do or say, to pass away all those hours? Smoke, or go to sleep, just like any common man? Don't say that, for I'd really resolved to make him my hero—my king of dreamland!"

"Horns, hoofs, forked tail—you can have him, Miss Brinson! I can get a dream-disturber much cheaper than he comes!" magnanimously uttered Marble.

"Is he really—but of course he is not! You are laughing at me, but I don't care. I only wish this Prince Lucifer would drop down in our midst this very moment—I'd ask him to dance the first set with me, if only to show my belief that—"

"The devil is not so black as we paint him? Well, you may have your wish, after all, Miss Brinson, for as we parted, Prince Lucifer bade us not be surprised if he should drop in to witness the ceremony!"

There was a little chorus of cries and exclamations among the fair sex at this announcement, but John Dement frowned blackly as he spoke sharply:

"Ef he comes, I know how he'll go out—with a stout noose 'round his thrapple! But of course you're jest talkin', Marble?"

"That was his parting speech, I assure you, sir," was the reply.

"Mere bravado, of course," shortly interposed Cameron. "He certainly does not lack for impudence, whatever else may be wanting. As proof, if aught further is needed, he gave me a long message to deliver to the Law and Order League, which—"

"This ain't the lodge room, Cameron!"

"Nor is the message a secret one," with a grim smile. "It is simply a declaration of war to the knife, and the knife to the hilt, if we any of us dare to kick against his running off our stock. He swears to depopulate the Pan-handle and convert it into a howling desert unless we fold our arms and permit him and his Imps to work their sweet will. If we submit quietly, he'll only take a due proportion from each stockman, and so even up his toll."

For a little all were mute, through pure amazement at such an impudent demand, but then the storm burst and raged hotly for a space.

Every man present, save and except the venerable white-haired minister of the Gospel—missionary, he might be termed with propriety—were ranchers on a large or a small scale, consequently the audacious message struck them hard.

With a faint smile upon his pale, handsome face, Fergus Cameron listened in silence to the outburst, in which the voices of women were not lacking, but then he lifted his hand and spoke a little sharply:

"I have delivered the message in substance, as I promised, at the earliest opportunity, but this is no time or place for discussing it in all its bearings. It will be brought up in the lodgeroom at the proper time. Until then, would it not be best to drop the matter?"

"And get down to solid business—or pleasure—which is it?" laughed Marble, separating from his companions in misfortune, seemingly glad that the ordeal was over so happily. "My invitation spells wedding, and my watch—hallo! somebody's been picking my pockets! Close the doors and send for—"

"Prince Lucifer!" laughed Miss Brinson.

"I can't produce him, but I can offer his card," abruptly interposed a young man who had kept silence, with a very grave face during the past explanation.

"What do you mean, David Ashbrook?"

sharply demanded Cameron, turning abruptly toward the speaker, who stepped forward, pale but firm.

"Precisely what I and, Cameron, as you can see for yourself," said the young rancher held up an oblong bit of pasteboard on which were drawn blood-red characters.

Cameron snatched the card from his hand, glancing at its face, then crumpling it up and making a motion as though about to throw it out of the window. But then, with a short, hard laugh, he refrained.

"After all, what matter? If somewhat clumsy, it is still a jest."

"Not of my manufacture, Mr. Cameron," a little stiffly retorted Ashbrook. "One who called himself Prince Lucifer ordered me to present that card to either the bride or the bridegroom!"

Another surprise! Were they never to end?

Miss Brinson deftly twitted the card from Cameron's hand, and it passed from hand to hand amid the ejaculations of disgust, surprise or fright, as the case might be. Frowning Fergus Cameron watched the movement, his lips gathering tightly as the card reached the hand of Della Dement.

Calmly she looked upon its face, a faint smile curling her red lips as she did so. Yet it was not a pleasant conceit, to say the least.

In the center a grinning skull resting upon cross-bones, dividing the name "Prince Lucifer."

"At what hour did you part with your Prince Lucifer, Cameron?" asked David Ashbrook.

"At or near sunset," was the short response.

"And he declared that he was Prince Lucifer?"

"I have said so—yes."

"Then there's a lie out somewhere!"

"What am I to understand by that, sir?" sharply demanded Cameron, flushing hotly, then turning pale as marble.

"Drop it, you!" grated John Dement, striding between the two men, his huge fists tightly clinched, a dangerous light glowing in his eyes. "Ef it's a row you're tryin' to kick up, Dave Ashbrook—"

"I kick up a row?" laughed the young man, holding up an open hand deprecatorily. "My dear sir, I beg your pardon, but—"

"You said it was a lie!"

"But not that any one present uttered it," was the quick reply, as the speaker moved toward Cameron with extended hand. "Surely you did not take it in that light, Cameron?"

"I hardly understood you, I must confess," a little coldly.

"Then I'll make it so clear that there can be no room for doubt," a little tartly retorted the young rancher. "Either your Prince Lucifer, or my Prince Lucifer, died in claiming that title. For just at sunset I was talking with one who declared himself that very rascal! And as you were at the Timbers, while I was near the Lone Knob, full forty miles away, either your devil or mine must have lied!"

"What did he do? What did he say? What did he look like?" came a chorus of questions from all sides as the thoroughly interested guests crowded around this fresh sensation.

"I was a little later than I intended, though through no fault of my own," began Ashbrook, seeing that nothing less than a full explanation would satisfy the company. "Fearing to lose the ceremony, I was riding hard and paying little attention to my surroundings, when my nag suddenly stopped short, almost unseating me. And before I could fairly recover myself, I was roped from behind and dragged backwards.

"I saved myself from falling by backing my horse, but was unable to reach a weapon or to throw off the noose before strong hands caught both me and my horse. He held fast, and I was dropped to the ground and held fast by the arms, while a pistol rubbed up against my skull.

"That was unpleasant enough, but worse was coming—did come, in the shape of a blood-red fiend which rose before me so suddenly that I could almost have taken oath it came out of the solid earth!"

"And it was the—Prince Lucifer?" asked Miss Brinson, with a delicious little shiver.

"It looked like a picture of the—first, enlarged and filled with life," half-earnestly, half-jestingly replied Ashbrook. "It wore the traditional horns on its head, and may have had the tail as well, but if so, the black cloak concealed it from me. There was the hooked nose, the up-turned mustaches and pointed beard, with the oblong eyes, all according to rule, and at first glance it looked very satanic, I assure you. But later—when I grew cooler, and it was talking, I made out a mask of wire or gauze."

"And it was not the—ahem?" coughed Miss Brinson.

"Tradition says the original Prince Lucifer was a male, while this imitation, unless I greatly mistake, was a woman!" declared Ashbrook, amid a chorus of astonished exclamations.

"Why do you think so?" asked Cameron.

"From the voice, the figure, when the black cloak was opened sufficiently for a fair glance, and from the movements which the mask made

while talking—it is not easy to describe, you see, but such was and is my impression."

"It is possible, of course, but very improbable."

"Time will tell, no doubt, for if he, she or it keeps up these wild pranks, a dose of lead will reveal all in the end. But to my story:

"The red mask introduced himself, or herself—"

"Allow his claim, since there is no positive proof to the contrary."

"Very well; it makes little difference. He introduced himself as Prince Lucifer, and asked whether I was bound. I felt tempted to reply I was bound with a most uncomfortably tight noose, but felt a little diffident under the circumstances, and simply replied that I was heading for this ranch, as an invited guest to the wedding. That I was already a little late, and would really feel obliged if he could shorten the interview just a trifle.

"I wasn't half as cool and unconcerned as I tried to make out, but his Satanic Majesty apparently failed to detect my hypocrisy, for he laughingly replied that there was ample time; that though the hour was fixed for eight the ceremony would certainly be postponed, for cause."

The guests interchanged quick glances, and as though he feared she would grow frightened, Fergus Cameron moved to the side of the bride elect, taking her little hand in his and pressing it reassuringly.

"It is only silly mummery, dear," he whispered softly, as he bent over her. "I swear to punish the vile rascals severely for it all!"

"I am not afraid," was the quiet response.

"Of course I couldn't dispute his word, with that gun scraping the hair off my head," laughed Ashbrook; "but of course I had my doubts, although—but let it go," with a slightly confused air, as of one who was near uttering an unpleasant and untimely remark.

"To cut the story short, Prince Lucifer said that unfortunately he would be unable to attend the wedding, and so had stopped me that I might convey his gift to the fair bride. With these words he gave me his card, took away my tools, and permitted me to mount my horse again.

"As I did so, he placed a package in my hands, swearing me to deliver it safely into Miss Dement's hands just before the ceremony was performed. I demurred, but he swore that he'd scatter my brains over a ten-acre lot in case I refused, so I submitted. It seems he still doubted me, for he dictated a most blood-curdling oath, forcing me to repeat it after him. I could do no less, of course, and taking the bundle, I hastened on, to find all in dismay at the non-appearance of the groom."

"And the gift?" sharply demanded Cameron.

"Is in a place of safety," returned Ashbrook, moving away, but soon returning with a flat parcel in his hands. "Miss Dement, I now quit myself of my trust, and place this gift at your feet!"

"Away with it!" sharply cried Cameron, springing to his feet, his blue eyes aglow. "It may be an infernal machine of some sort, to—"

David Ashbrook turned pale as death at this impetuous speech, but he caught up the package which Cameron would have thrust aside with his foot, tossing back his long hair half-defiantly as he cried:

"I carried it safely for miles and it did not injure me!"

"But it is still fastened; you did not attempt to open it."

"I will do so now, if Miss Dement will grant me leave," more calmly added the young man, his hand on the confining string, but pausing with his eyes upon the half-bewildered bride for the desired permission.

"Open it if you will, but she certainly shall not," coldly uttered Cameron, moving so as to interpose his own body in front of her. "I may be wrong—doubtless I am—but all this has unnerved me, and I scent evil in everything."

"Not even a devil would be inhuman enough to wish injury to such as Miss Dement," said Ashbrook, as he broke the string and tore off the wrapping, only to start back with a low cry of wondering anger as there fell from his hands a dress, vail, and gloves of sable crape, while on top of them lay a widow's cap! And to this was pinned a card bearing in large letters the words:

"To the bride of an hour, with the compliments of Prince Lucifer!"

Amazed, Cameron started back, and Della caught sight of the ill-omened bridal-gift, and uttered a low cry as she read the evil words.

It came like a blow on her heart, and she sunk back, almost fainting.

And just then a shrill, piercing cry echoed through the ranch. —

CHAPTER IV.

AN ILL-OMENED WEDDING.

"GREAT Scott an' little young 'uns! That's Sally's beller, an' I'm on a night stompede to ketch the heathen Maverick as'd do her hurt or make a skeer! Out o' the trail, you!"

Curious as their betters, the cowboys pressed

close to the open door and windows in order to the better satisfy their curiosity as to what strange adventure had befallen the bridegroom and his friends.

Among them was Melancholy Mike, for the time being forgetting his own trials and tribulations, only to be awakened by that wild, piercing shriek which rung through the ranch, and which he alone seemed to recognize as the voice of the usually sedate and prim Sarah Stokes.

A moment of stupefied bewilderment, for he could scarcely realize that aught mortal or immortal had power to extort such a confession of weakness from the tall virgin, but then, as another and still a third shriek came quivering through the building, he flung aside all who barred his way, leaping in at the open door and plunging straight toward the scene from whence sped the alarm, forgetting all save that his adored must be in great extremity.

"Out o' the way, or I'll run ye down!" he panted, lowering his head and literally butting a passage through the startled assembly, and only pausing as the door opened to admit the frantic figure of Sally Stokes.

He had barely time to brace himself before the collision, but then one arm clasped the maiden tightly to his swelling bosom, while with his free hand he brandished a huge revolver, grimly defying all her enemies.

John Dement strode forward and his hand fell heavily on the fat cowboy's shoulder, his voice harsh and peremptory:

"Pull out o' here, Mike! An' you, Sally, let up on that howlin', or I'll cram the fist o' me down your gutlet!"

"Be durned—lay still, Sally!" spluttered Mike, with a defiant roll of his honest blue eyes toward the flushed face of the master.

"Ketch me! Afore all the comp'ny! Git out!" panted Sarah, that vigorous squeeze restoring her scattered senses and lending her a scandalized power that sent the fat cowboy reeling away toward the door.

But then her fictitious strength failed her, and she dropped in a heap at the feet of the angry rancher, covering her face and rocking to and fro as she moaned:

"Oh, Miss Della! that horrible, unchristian thing! To put it there, right where—the idea! And oh, my poor heart!"

Della hastily passed before the angry rancher, kneeling beside the now sobbing, hysterical woman, gently caressing her with her soft, cool hands, murmuring soothing words in the poor creature's ear.

John Dement as a safety valve to his hot anger, which he could not pour out upon Sally just then, caught Melancholy Mike by the shoulders and pushed him out of the room, reading him a lecture on etiquette far more forcible than polished.

"It's two durn idjots come together!" he growled, in conclusion. "Sarve ye both right ef I was to make the dominie jine ye together so tight that nothin' less than the blare o' Gabril's horn could split ye in two pieces ag'in—so that!"

"Do it, boss!" eagerly spluttered Mike, all ardor. "Do it, an' I'll punch cows fer ye without a cent o' wages ontel that same horn bu'sts wide open! I'm willin', an' more too!"

But John Dement was not waiting to hear the speech out. His black eyes glowing redly beneath his lowered brows, he strode back into the house where the care of Della had partially quieted the hysterical Sally.

"What was the critter bellerin' 'bout, anyway, Dell?" he demanded, steadying his voice with an effort. "She wants a powerful good excuse fer kickin' up sech a mighty hellerberloo, or thar'll be—"

"It was something she saw, or imagined she saw, up in my room, father," hastily replied the bride-elect, and she felt the bony, angular form quiver afresh in her arms.

"Which I ain't an' never was 'maginatory!" cried Sally, with a sudden outburst of indignation. "I see it with my own eyes, I did, an' it's a burnin' shame that sech things kin be an' nobody punished for the awful wickedness! An' it's a shock that's turned my heart to frozen ice that'll never thaw out ag'in, to see the horrigable abomination on the table 'mongst all the other presents, an' it said—oh, Miss Della! don't you go fer the life o' ye! An' what a fool I was that I didn't bu'st it all to flinders fu'st off, so I was!"

John Dement turned toward the door through which Sally had plunged into the arms of the fat cowboy, and which led to the upper story. He had heard enough to know that Sally had received the shock that rendered her well-nigh helpless and senseless in his daughter's chamber, and as the shortest way to a solution of the mystery, he strode in that direction.

Della sprung to her feet and caught the arm of Fergus Cameron as he started to follow. He hesitated, but she urged him on, her eyes glowing vividly, though her face was very pale.

"You had better wait here, darling," hastily murmured the groom elect, bending his proud head until his blonde mustache brushed her pale cheek. "Your father and I—"

"It is part of the play," with a low, unnatural laugh as she pressed on to the foot of the

stairs. "I have seen the beginning, I must witness the end. Come—must I go alone?"

John Dement had already disappeared, and there came back a grating curse of angry amazement. Della dropped the arm of her lover, and ran swiftly up the flight, entering the chamber just in time to interpose herself before the destroying hand of her father. His eyes were fairly blazing, his face was purple, the great veins swelling on his neck and across his temples. He seemed on the point of apoplexy.

One glance at his face, then Della looked toward the object which he was on the point of destroying when she interfered. One glance, then she started back with a low, frightened cry, to be clasped tightly in the strong arms of her lover.

"What is it? A tombstone? There is an inscription—I can see my name written upon it!" she gasped, her staring eyeballs still fastened upon the snowy white object, even though Cameron sought to avert her gaze by turning her back to the table on which rested the wedding presents.

"Heaven blast the hand that played such a vile jest!" grated Fergus Cameron, his face as pale as death itself. "Come, my poor darling, this is no sight for your eyes; come with me."

With gentle force he would have led her down-stairs, but Della broke away from him with a short, forced laugh, a sudden glow leaping into her cheeks. There was no weakness, no unsteadiness in her voice as she exclaimed:

"In a moment if you will, but not before I've had a closer look at my mysterious gift! It is lovely—but—hideous!"

"The harm's done," growled John Dement, grasping the young rancher by the arm and checking his advance. "She's my child, an' it won't do her no hurt to look at the thing. She's pure grit! Let her look, an' so will we. Mebbe we kin ketch some hint as to whar it come from an' how. Then—"

No need to fill the hiatus. The black scowl upon his hard face, the red glow in his eyes, the tones of his voice, all spoke plain enough. Let that clew be discovered, and nothing short of death would stop the avenger in his work of retribution.

Gently Fergus Cameron encircled the waist of his betrothed with one arm, silently he took the grim gift from her hand, his own trembling far more than hers, strong man though he was.

"Lovely, yet hideous!"

The words were well chosen.

A miniature monument of pure white marble, carved with skill and polished with care, not the slightest detail being neglected or slurred over by the artist, whoever that might be.

A broken shaft. A dying dove with open wings and parted beak, lying upon its back. Above it, with wings partly extended, as though just in the act of taking flight with its prey, a fierce hawk, its cruel talons buried in the rounded breast of the dove, a single blood-red drop showing in startling contrast with the snowy plumage, directly over the heart of the victim.

On one side of the base, a tablet in which were carved the words, "PRINCE LUCIFER," separated by the same grim symbol which decorated the bit of pasteboard which David Ashbrook had brought fresh from the hand of the Cattle-thief Chief.

Only a glance did Fergus Cameron give this side of the ominous gift, for, with steady hand Della Dement turned the monument about, and with untrembling finger pointed at the words which were skilfully carved on the opposite tablet.

They ran as follows:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF
DELLA DEMENT CAMERON,
"The Bride of an Hour!"

WEDDED

On the Evening of September 18th, 188—

DIED

On the Morning of September 19th, 188—"

Cameron read this inscription, then, in sudden fury, he lifted the ill-omened gift to dash it to atoms on the floor. But John Dement caught his hand and twisted the monument from him, grating:

"I'll keep it—keep it ontel I find who putt it thar. Then, I sw'ar by the bones o' my parents, I'll break it to bits on the dirty whelp's head, an' make him swaller 'em one by one afore I tear off his currish hide by inches!"

With a little shiver Della clung closer to the side of her betrothed, murmuring faintly:

"The gue ts are waiting—they will grow uneasy—take me back to them, please!"

Bravely as she had withheld the chilling shock, she was showing its effects now, and Cameron turned a shade paler as he restrained her unsteady steps, a glance bringing Fred Marble to his side.

"Go amuse the people as best you can. Say anything, do anything, to gain time. Tell them it is all a silly jest, which will be explained shortly. Go—and do your best, Fred!"

"I'll cool their curiosity, if I have to duck 'em every one in the horse-troughs!" declared the

good-natured rancher, running down-stairs and forcing all the curious before him, closing the door.

John Dement had crossed the hall to stow away the grim gift in a place of safety, but came back just as Marble cleared the way. His face grew a shade softer as he saw how pale and ill Della had turned, and for the moment his mad fury was turned to anxious solicitude.

"You ain't takin' it so hard, Dell, my gal?" he uttered, huskily, both her hands in his broad palms. "It's only a dirty trick—some o' the low-down critters you turned up your nose at, most like! It'll be sore bones fer them ef ever I hit the right trail!"

"It was a shock—coming after the suspense," with a faint smile as she bravely rallied. "I will be all right in a minute or two, if you leave me to myself. Our guests—"

"Durn the guests! Take a sip o' this, little one," and John Dement pressed a whisky-flask upon her.

"It would make me worse, instead of better, father," averting her face, with a little laugh. "You know my horror of liquor. And, indeed, I am much better—I am quite strong again: see!"

She would have stood alone, but Fergus Cameron clasped her still more closely to his breast, his face very white, his voice hard and only held steady through strong will.

"You know, Mr. Dement, and so do you, Della, that ever since our first meeting, my dearest, almost my sole wish has been to win you for a wife. I do not say that I love you better than ever man loved woman before, but I do say that woman was never adored more wholly, more whole-heartedly."

"Don't we know it?" impatiently uttered Dement, with a keen, half-doubting glance into the face of the speaker. "What's the use in wastin' time tellin' old tales?"

"So long as I alone was threatened, I laughed at it and went my way unmoved; for threatened I have been, a full dozen times since the day invitations were sent out for this wedding," quietly resumed the young rancher. "Mysterious messages have met me at almost every turn, saying that my marriage would be my death, but I put them aside and only thought of them while seeking to discover the author. In this I have failed, so far."

"We'll ketch the dirty whelp, some day, though; an' then we'll hev a holy picnic!" grated Dement, hardly.

"You never told me, Fergus!" murmured Della, reproachfully.

"Because I took it as simple spitework on the part of—of some person whom you had been forced to reject, darling. I would not give you cause for dark thoughts. But now—now that they have begun to threaten you—now that they have dared go so far as to send you such a frightful gift—I feel that I must give you up—"

"Do what?" sharply uttered Dement, grasping the arm of the young rancher with a force that almost broke the skin. "Give her up? Make her the talk an' laughin' stock o' all the Pan-handle? Hev it go out that you've shook my gal—my Dell?"

A bold man might have been excused from shrinking away from that menacing glare, but Fergus Cameron faced the rancher boldly, his face pale enough, but with no trace of fear in it or in his eyes.

"For her sake, Mr. Dement, and not for good and all. Only until we can run this foul imp to earth and inflict on him a punishment such as will effectually deter his fellows from following his example."

"Durn your fine soundin' words, Ferg Cameron," grated Dement, still unappeased, still suspicious. "Invites was sent out fer a weddin' this night, an' a weddin' thar shell be, though all the imps o' Tophet rise up to skeer fine-haired critters like you out o' your boots! Ef not you, then some other. Little as I like him, Oscar Radford wouldn't take water like this, tricks or no tricks!"

Pale, trembling, Della turned from one speaker to the other. Truly, this was an ill-omened bridal eve!

She shivered afresh at the mention of the lover whom she had parted with in hot anger, but the words gave her strength to interpose.

"Father, Mr. Cameron means no disrespect to you or me, I am sure. And, after all, it may be the wisest plan to postpone the ceremony."

John Dement grasped her hands almost roughly, stooping until their eyes met, gazing intently into her troubled orbs for a brief space.

"Dell, you ain't lettin' this durned foolishness skeer you?"

"I'm not frightened—now," with a toss of her proud little head, the color slowly returning to her cheeks as though she drank in renewed courage from that steady gaze.

"An' you ain't fool enough to take any stock in them words? You don't look at it as anythin' more than a coward's trick? You don't b'lieve they'll hev to come true, jest beca'se they're writ down in stone!"

"I'm your daughter, father, and that answers all your questions," was the prompt, even response.

John Dement rose erect with a long breath of

relief, though the dark scowl did not wholly fade out of his countenance.

"I was a durned fool, Dell, but I raally begun to think you was turnin' coward, too, keepin' bad comp'ny."

"Meaning me, Mr. Dement?" half-smiled the young rancher.

"Fer sure," was the blunt retort. "Who else is they tryin' to sneak out? Not that either o' us wants to hold ye fast, mind ye," with hasty tongue at thoughts of his daughter's dignity.

"You kin go the shortest road out o' this house, but you don't come back no more. You kin go, an' I'll foller ye as soon as I putt a man in the place you ain't half-fit to fill!"

Fergus Cameron turned to Della, without deigning to answer this thinly-veiled threat, his voice low and earnest as he uttered:

"You have not misunderstood me, darling? You appreciate the great sacrifice I was ready to make? You know it was solely for your sake, for your peace and quietness of mind?"

Della hesitated, the color slowly fading from her cheeks, her dark eyes drooping, her white fingers entwining nervously.

She was very mortal, this little girl. She had a hasty temper, and was very much spoiled, even in childhood when away from her only parent. She was so witching, so "cunning," had such a way of gaining her desired ends against all reason, by coaxing if possible, by storming if milder means failed, that she had been rarely crossed by those who should have schooled her better. And since her coming to the ranch nothing had been permitted to cross her will. From John Dement down to the humblest employee on the place, all had bowed to the little queen, until she felt that she had but to express a wish to have it fulfilled.

This belief kept her from yielding in that last passionate quarrel with Oscar Radford, and as he withstood her caprice, as it really was, her anger caused her to make the rupture complete. This anger led her to accept Fergus Cameron, and to persuade herself that, after all, she loved him far more sincerely than she had ever loved Oscar. And it was her anger, her pride, that kept her in this mind until now.

She had bravely borne up against that long, wearing strain of looking and waiting for the tardy bridegroom, and pride had caused her smile and jest even while the heart was growing sick within her; had given her strength to repulse the proffered sympathy of Oscar Radford; had enabled her to rally from even the chilling shock which benumbed her senses as she caught sight of that grim bridal gift in the name of Prince Lucifer; but when Fergus Cameron himself proposed that the wedding ceremony should be postponed, the joyous leap her heart gave told her what she had until now concealed even from herself.

Her love for Oscar Radford was still living!

"Della, surely you do not doubt?" hurriedly muttered Cameron, turning almost ghastly as he pressed her hands in his. "You know I was thinking only of you! That it wrung my heart terribly to propose even a brief delay in making you all mine? You know this, darling?"

"Don't be a fool, Dell," roughly interposed John Dement, only too willing to catch at the apology. "The folks is waitin' an' gabblin' all sorts o' lies, no doubt! The durned fools! But they will do it, an' heap wuss ef the durnine is cheated out of a job! You know it, gal?"

"I am ready," the girl replied, rising with the ghost of a smile. "Go down, both of you, and get all ready. I will not keep you waiting long."

"That's hearty, an' like my pet!" chuckled John Dement, with an air of intense relief, for he dreaded "talk" as Satan is said to dread holy water. "Don't stop too long, lad, or I'll send the hull passel o' wimmin critters up to fetch ye—an' they'll do it, too, bet ye!"

So relieved was he that all ugly thoughts were banished for the present as he ran down the stairs, and the curious guests brightened up wonderfully when they beheld his smiling countenance. So many strange things had happened, that they really began to fear that they were fated to be cheated out of their "frolic," after all.

"Twasn't nothin' but a mighty clumsy joke, an' nobody'd bin hurt or bothered ef that durned Sally hedn't gone hystericky," he explained in an off-hand tone, as Miss Kate Brinson and several other young ladies flocked around him with eager inquiries. "Scat, you critters! I'm a married man, ef I be a widderer, an' you're wuss then wastin' ammynition on the likes o' me! Ain't they enough younger an' uglier men fer ye to practice onto? Ef they ain't, I'll call in the boys—I'll do it, too, durned ef I don't!" in his excess of relief at escaping what at one time promised to be a painful scene. "They're human, like the rest o' us, an' kin 'joy a look-on with the best!"

Only pausing to whisper a warning to the minister, and to bid Fred Marble and McKeever get ready to receive the happy couple when they descended, John Dement rushed out of the house and into the flock of scattering cowboys, who expected a "Dutch blessing" for their peeping propensities. It did not take many words to set them at their ease, however, and

with bashful hair-smoothing, dress-adjusting, they fled silently inside the big room, standing stiff and pleasantly awkward along the wall.

Among them was Melancholy Mike, who sidled along bashfully until he reached the side of Sally Stokes, stiff and decorous, but with her eyes and nose painfully red, and her thin lips tightly screwed together, the more surely to restrain her shaken nerves.

The guests also fell still and silent, with the peculiar restraint which invariably descends upon a wedding-party in primitive regions; until the "fatal act" is accomplished, at least.

John Dement was stooping over the white-haired missionary, talking in an undertone, but with his nervousness all the more evident from his heroic efforts to appear wholly at his ease.

So still was all that the light footfalls of the bridal pair were distinctly audible as they descended the stairs, and Fred Marble with Kate Brinson, and Edward McKeever with another young lady, stood at the door to receive them, according to rule.

John Dement heaved a mighty sigh of relief as he caught the first glimpse of his daughter. No longer did he fear that Della would bring shame upon him.

A charming bride, truly! Her cheeks were softly flushed, and there was a bright, yet demure smile on her red lips and a brilliant light in her dark eyes as they roved swiftly over the company. Nor did she falter or change color as she caught the cold, stern gaze of Oscar Radford.

In silence the three couple ranged themselves before the minister of the Gospel, as he rose from his chair and opened his book. He was an elder of the Methodist church, and so no one thought strange that he should preface the ceremony proper by reading a few verses of the Gospel—the surprise would have followed an omission, rather.

Closing the holy book, he spoke gently, lovingly, more like an affectionate relative than an almost stranger to the young couple whom he was about to unite "for better, for worse."

No need to repeat his kindly advice. It was born of a long and sad life; of a life pure and holy as that of a saint—the words of a man who loved his fellow-beings even better than himself.

The head of the fair bride began to droop, and her eyes to dim, as that recently born doubt came back to reproach her. But the minister saw this, and with true kindness he cut his remarks short and pronounced the brief sentences that comprise the marriage service according to his church.

And when the last words were uttered, and the minister gently touched the forehead of the bride with his lips, John Dement cast off the bonds with which he had fettered himself for the occasion, giving the new-made wife a hearty hug and kiss, then, pushing her into the arms of her smiling husband, as he flung up one hand and cried, defiantly:

"Whar be ye now, Prince Lucifer an' all your dirty Imps? Do yer wu'st while ye kin, fer the crack o' day I'm on your— Ah!"

The defiance was never completed, for just as the laughing guests flocked forward to congratulate the newly wedded pair, a sharp report rung out, a bright light flashed through an open window, and with a half-stifled groan of pain, John Dement reeled, falling heavily to the floor!

CHAPTER V.

CHASING A WILL-O'-THE-WISP.

For an instant paralysis, complete and universal, seemed to fall upon the wedding guests, brave and ready acting though the men were.

It was so sudden and so unexpected, this horrible attempt at assassination—this murder of a father almost in the arms of his happy daughter!

Through their laughing, bustling ranks the bullet had sped to single out the one of all their number to whom death seemed the most foreign, just then; the one on whose lips was a half-laughing, wholly earnest challenge to the lawless being who—

"It's his work! Prince Lucifer! Down with him!"

The numbing spell was broken as these words burst from the lips of Fred Marble, and with fierce, vengeful cries and curses, strong men fought with each other in the effort to first reach the open air and strike the trail of the assassin.

The cry for vengeance broke the stupor which had seized upon the newly made wife as she held her father reel and fall bleeding at her feet, and with a wailing cry, she sunk on her knees beside his body, taking his head in her arms, staining the white lace at her throat with his life-blood.

Beside her knelt Fergus Cameron, his face no less white, though hard and stern-set; and opposite them was the white-haired man of God.

Now that the brief spell of inactivity was broken, the guests and the cowboys cleared the room as speedily as possible, leaping through the open windows, crushing out at the open door, fighting and struggling as fiercely as though fleeing from a fire fiend when the loss of

a moment meant all the difference between life and death. Out into the open air, where the clear moon was sailing through the almost cloudless sky, casting her silvery beams over the earth and making surrounding objects almost as distinct as at twilight. Out with savagely gripped knife or pistol, with vengeance-filled eyes glaring swiftly about in quest of the foul assassin.

But the expected sight greeted them not. No fugitive was visible. Neither horse nor footman could they distinguish fleeing for life from their just vengeance. As far as the human eyes could reach, the plain was unbroken by living object!

"He's dodged 'round the ranch!" cried one of the cowboys, starting off at speed, with revolver in readiness for a flying shot.

"Split an' head him off! Some of you get horses!" supplemented Fred Marble, as he dashed around the opposite corner of the building.

Pistols were half raised, and fingers began to contract on triggers for snap-shots as the leaders caught sight of each other turning the rear of the ranch, but luckily recognition came in time to avert a fatal mistake.

Out over the plain, through and among the outbuildings, their eager eyes glanced, seeking to spot the daring assassin, but vainly. Only a few restless horses, a stray cow and calf: no signs of human life!

"The devil's hiding somewhere close at hand!" cried Marble, his excited voice ringing out impetuously as the searchers seemed to be at a loss for the next move. "He hasn't run, or we'd see or hear him. He's in hiding, hoping we'll overrun him in the first heat!"

"We'll rout 'im out of he's on the ranch!"

"Scatter out and surround the stables and hiding-places, all of you!" sharply added Marble, who seemed to take the lead as a matter of course. "Don't leave an opening big enough for a gopher to steal through without a salute!"

The cowboys, having found what at first they lacked, a leader, sped away in prompt obedience, mingling cheers with their curses of vengeance on the vile assassin, and in a marvelously brief period had the stables, corrals and other outbuildings surrounded. Woe unto the being who attempted to run that gauntlet!

"Good lad's!" shouted Fred Marble, approvingly, as he noted this speedy action. "All eyes open, and don't let your great-grandmother through the lines without halting her long enough to prove her clear of even the ghost of a suspicion!"

With nimble tongue he named a half-dozen men whom he picked to aid him in a thorough search of the stables, sheds and corrals, bidding them keep a close lookout in all directions while he procured a light that would serve their purpose and prove a safeguard against the audacious assassin dodging them in the obscurity that reigned within the outbuildings.

"There's no especial rush, you understand," he took time to add. "The scoundrel didn't run away, afoot or on horseback, or we'd have both seen and heard him. He's hiding near at hand, and if he has anything human about him, he's already suffering the pangs of death through anticipation."

"It ain't a primin' to what he'll ketch when we sight him, though!"

"Skinnin' alive'll be gittin' married to what he'll ketch!" cried Melancholy Mike, making the contrast as strong as possible for him.

"The most votes carries the day, when we've caught our hare, which won't take long when I get a light to lend us its eyes," half-laughed Fred Marble, as he turned and hurried around to the front door.

There a great and joyous surprise awaited him, for almost the first object his eyes rested upon was the burly figure of John Dement in the act of rising from the blood-marked floor, looking like anything but a corpse.

"Glory to Moses!" ejaculated the impetuous young rancher, as he realized the truth and leaped into the room, his handsome face all aglow, his eager hands outstretched to welcome the old man back to life.

"Then you've ketched the dirty cur?" even more eagerly cried John Dement, almost impatiently thrusting aside the clinging arms of his half-laughing, half-crying daughter. "You've got the critter? It's the pizen imp as plays the devil!"

"You're right side up, then? You're not a corpus, after all?" ejaculated Marble, grasping the horny hands and shaking them in an excess of honest delight. "We'll have the dance after all, and—"

"Durn the dance, an' durn the corpus!" impatiently snorted the thoroughly angry rancher, jerking his hands free, to double one huge fist and shake it menacingly beneath the nose of Fred Marble as he gratingly added: "Unless it's the corpus o' the dog as popped me over from the dark! If you've wiped him out 'thout givin' me a whack at him fu'st off, I'll lick hoof an' horns off o' every last critter as tuck a hand in the killin'—you hear me?"

Not a dead man, most certainly! Not even seriously injured, though the red blood was even then trickling down over his passion-flushed

face as he glared into the half-startled, half-amused countenance of the young rancher before him.

Fred Marble could both talk and act promptly and to the point when there was an actual necessity for either, and he did so now.

"We haven't killed the rascal, nor even sighted him as—"

"You let him git away? The hull kit o' you?" snarled Dement, his purple face turning a sickly yellow all in an instant, his voice lowering and growing husky.

"He hasn't escaped, unless he has wings to fly through the air, or powers to burrow in the earth," quickly replied Marble, cooler than ever, though he was warily watching the half-crazed rancher, ready to foil or ward off any mad blow. "He's hiding somewhere about the place, and the boys have formed a surround through which a rat couldn't sneak unseen. I came for a light to—"

"Why the devil didn't ye say so, fu'st-off?" spluttered the rancher, breaking out in a fresh spot. "That rattle tongue o' yours, boy—git out o' the way, Petticuts, ef you don't want to be run over!"

Like a human tornado John Dement dashed into the kitchen and as quickly returned with a couple of lanterns, thrusting one into the hands of Marble as he growled:

"Hurry up! Durn the lightin' of 'em! I've got eyes that'd see the dirty whelp ef he was buried a thousan' miles deep under a mount'in!"

During this stormy scene, Della was tightly clasped in the strong arms of her husband, but now she freed herself, hurriedly uttering:

"Go—guard my father! He is so terribly angry, that he'll not once think of danger to himself. Go—if you love me, Fergus!"

Even then Cameron hesitated for an instant, as he gave a swift glance around the room. The aged minister of the gospel was the only man left in the room besides himself.

"Go, Fergus, and we'll be her body-guard!" exclaimed Kate Brinson, readily divining the cause of his hesitation. "It would be a terribly bold army that dared to storm the fortress we defended—wouldn't it, girls?"

The newly made husband only paused long enough to press a kiss on the pale brow of his wife, then hastened through the door to join in the search for the daring enemy.

John Dement was too deeply angered to wait on the cooler, more systematic actions of the party under Fred Marble, and hurried on ahead with Fergus Cameron guarding him, growling and cursing through his grating teeth as disappointment after disappointment stared him in the face, as nook after nook was found empty.

"He's got off, an' fer two cents I'd climb up the back o' the pack o' idjots as let the cussed critter slip through tha'r fingers when they hed him safe ef they'd shet tha'r grip—an' me flat o' my back with a bloody head—an' not a bite to show fer it all!" he raged, dashing the useless lantern to the ground and trampling it beneath his feet in a spasm of furious disappointment.

"Wait for the others, and they may jump the game even yet," soothingly uttered Cameron, facing about with ready revolvers. "We hurried through so fast that we may have over-run the rascal."

"He ain't thar, I tell ye!" sulkily returned Dement, with another of the abrupt changes which were characteristic of the man. "I couldn't pass him by ef I was a blind man, I tell ye! I'd smell him out, ef I couldn't see him! He's gone—fer now! But I'll git him, sometime; an' when I do, he'll hev a double debt to pay off!"

He said no more, but waited the approach of the searching party in sullen silence. It was as he said. No game was jumped. And with blank, wondering looks, the others were forced to come to the same conclusion.

"He's gone—but how?" ejaculated Marble, scratching his head with a puzzled air. "He couldn't have run away. We must have seen him whether afoot or on horseback!"

"If mortal, we must!"

It was one of the gravest, soberest of the ranchers who pronounced the words, and there was no trace of levity or of jesting in either face or voice. And, ridiculous as it looks and sounds, when recorded in cold type, there was not one present, then who could either laugh or frown at the superstitious notion.

Say what we may, there is a vein of superstition running through the wisest and coolest-witted of us all, though one may pass through life without meeting anything to bring it prominently to the surface, and one may descend to the grave without so much as suspecting the existence of such a weakness; yet it is there, all the same.

And when it is remembered what an evil reputation clung to Prince Lucifer and his associates; when all that had happened that night is recalled; the arrest of bridegroom in one spot, and the capture of David Ashbrook by a second Prince Lucifer at the same hour, though full two-score miles separated the places where the ambuscades were sprung; when the mysteriously-deposited gift is borne in mind, and the strange vanishment after the shot through the open window; surely there is some excuse for a

feeling of vague superstition in the ranks of the baffled searchers.

"Man or devil, I'll round him up afore all's done!" doggedly muttered John Dement, with a glow of suspicion in the dark eyes that ran around the little group. "Mebbe he's right here amongst us! Mebbe he didn't try to run nur hide at all! Mebbe he jest stepped to one side an' jined in the rush an' hunt fer hisself!"

Low ejaculations greeted this speech, and swift glances ran around the little circle, but they were more of surprise than suspicion.

"You surely cannot mean to insinuate—"

"It's either that, or else the doin's of a genuine devil," bluntly interjected the rancher, adding, in a less harsh tone: "not that I'm throwin' out slurs on any one o' you, gentlemen. I don't say ary one o' this crowd played me dirt; but I do say that the critter as fired at me from the dark was mortal man; an' bein' a man, he couldn't a faded away in air an' nothin'ness. An' grantin' that, he must be one o' the outfit now pertendin' to hunt down hisself! All I ax o' good luck is to spot him once!"

"It must be so, incredible as it sounds," slowly uttered Fergus Cameron, anxiety perceptible in his tones, despite his evident attempt to conceal it. "It would look churlish to put a stop to the dance, after so many have come so far expressly to enjoy it, but—"

"You hush!" almost rudely interposed Dement, his honest face aglow. "Stop nothin'! What fer, I'd like to know?"

"I was thinking of Della, and—"

"She's my own child, ain't she? Waal, that settles it, then!"

"And my wife," a little coldly added Cameron. "She has suffered excitement enough, one would think, without asking her to run the risk of still more. If what you insinuate is true—if the rascal who shot at you is still in our midst, unsuspected, free to carry on his infernal tricks—what is to hinder him from playing still others?"

"That's jest the reason I say the fun's got to go on!" doggedly retorted Dement. "I want the durned critter to try it on ag'in, fer that's the only way we kin ketch him!"

"Of course you are master in your own house, Mr. Dement, but if my wife is of my mind, she will bid the company an early adieu and leave them to enjoy the frolic without her."

"If she is, I won't say a word ag'in' it," grimly laughed the old man, turning away toward the ranch. "She's your wife, es you say, Cameron, but I've knowed her heap longer'n you hev, an' I know her mind heap better, too. She's little, but what thar is of her is all pure grit! It ain't no durned spook business as 'll make her fling out the white feather, I tell ye!"

Fergus Cameron made no reply to this speech, but silently followed his dogmatic father-in-law to the house.

Still more slowly the little party of searchers took the same course, their faces grave, their thoughts troubled and perplexed.

As John Dement had declared, it was but a choice between superstition and double treachery. Unless possessed of more than mortal powers, the assassin must be one of the guests at the wedding, or one of the cowboys about the place, either belonging there, or of those who had gathered from the neighboring ranches.

Either horn of the dilemma was a disagreeable one to face, for if it is proverbially hard "to buck against the devil," so it was anything but a comfortable feeling to know that one's enemy wore the smooth and plausible guise of a friend and comrade.

"Confound it all!" muttered Fred Marble, in disgust. "Why couldn't the grumpy old fellow keep that sweet morsel for his own chewing, at least until after we'd had our frolic? Ugh! I'll be expecting bullet or steel from the hand of every one I pass, man or woman!"

"Our turn won't come to-night," soberly returned the same man who had first given vent to the feeling of superstition which all were more or less feeling. "It's Dement for it, just now."

"Then you think?"

"That all who are officers in the League are marked men—yes," was the grave interposition. "That this demon who is called Prince Lucifer only selects Cameron and Dement and his daughter because they are the most prominent figures to-night. He is playing with them now but I doubt if we see dawn without witness an actual tragedy!"

There was a chorus of half-laughing protests against this gloomy view, but nevertheless the party was most disagreeably impressed with the earnestness of their fellow.

Grant Pierson was one of the oldest ranchers in the company, and usually a man of sound common sense, well read, energetic, and one of the foremost in forming the alliance against the thieving horde that infested the cattle ranges. No one man in the Pan-handle possessed more influence over his associates, and his cool, steady gravity had made him almost an oracle among the younger members. On this account, his words possessed greater weight than, perhaps, they deserved.

Immediately on entering the house, John

Dement bluntly asked his daughter if what had happened was to spoil the sport of the company, and of course the answer was just what he had predicted, though all could see that Della was suffering from the unusual excitements and surprises which had poured upon them that evening.

"A frolic it is, an' the quicker you skeer that scowl out o' the two eyes o' ye, lad, the better ther gals will think o' ye!" chuckled John Dement, turning to the grave young rancher who was already bending over his fair bride.

"But not a bit of pleasure will we take, until you let some of us attend to that frightful hurt of yours, dear Mr. Dement!" cried Kate Brinson, both hands clasped on his broad shoulder, a little shiver running over her tall, queenly figure as she gazed at the half dried blood-marks on his face.

"Lord love ye, pritty!" chuckled the rancher, but with a look of genuine affection in his harsh face, for roguish Kate was a rare favorite with him. "When your weddin'-day is as fur behind ye as mine is behind me, you'll know better then to take two thoughts of a scratch like this—for you'll be used to heap wuss even ef they ain't made with jest the same kind o' weepins! Wal, you jest will!"

"I don't understand you, old bear, but I know it's something awfully malicious," with an affected pout that rarely became her, just then. "And I mean just what I say; not a note of music, not a single foot-tap will you hear until you've gone and washed your face and had that hurt looked after! I say so—and I'm Queen Kate, the Irresistible!"

"All right, pritty; an' you shell see fer yourself what a mighty rumpus you're kickin' up over nothin'," laughed the old rancher, catching her around the lithe waist and swinging her out of the room to the kitchen where they caught a glimpse of Melancholy Mike dodging out at the door, and Sally the sedate primly bobbing them a courtesy.

It was as John Dement declared: nothing more than a scalp wound, though the bullet had cut sufficiently deep to stun him for the moment and bring him to the floor like a dead man.

With plenty of water, and a few slips of court-plaster, he was pronounced fairly presentable by the fair superintendent of surgery, then rewarded with a kiss for his submission, greatly to the scandalization of the dignified Sarah Stokes.

Already there came the scraping of violins and the squeaking of an antiquated flute from the room in which the ceremony had been performed, but John Dement promptly put a veto on the dancing for the time being, declaring:

"It's so late now, thanks to the devil's doin's that's bin goin' on all the evenin', that it's out o' reason to ax a-fastin' man to kick up his heels like a frisky yearlin' on fresh pastur', when he knows that's a heap o' good fodder waitin' fer his grinders in easy reach. Business fu'st, an' then they won't be nothin' to keep us from givin' our hull 'tention to pleasure. Rope the critters ye've got your best eyes onto, gents, an' foller your leader! Pritty, somebody's goin' to git bad fooled, but it ain't me—not any!" chuckled the rancher as he tucked Kate's hand through his crooked arm and marched into the adjoining room, where supper was ready laid.

With much laughing and blushing, not altogether on the part of his ladies, the couples paired off and took their places, all growing hushed and grave while the white-haired minister asked a blessing.

Then—a short exclamation broke from John Dement's lips as he turned over his plate. A folded note lay on the cloth, and he was staring at it as he pushed back his chair as though he thought it was a venomous reptile, ready coiled for a spring.

"A billet-doux—and I never sent it!" exclaimed irrepressible Kate, with uplifted hands and an expression of reproach on her arch face. "Oh, you wicked deceiver! Just think!"

"Billy-be-durned!" exploded the rancher, turning fairly purple as a laugh ran around the tables. "Don't tetch it—the durned thing mought go off an'—didn't I tell ye so?" in half-triumph, half-anger, as Kate dropped the partially unfolded slip of paper with a little cry.

"It's another—it's signed by that frightful creature!" gasped Kate, shrinking away, turning pale as a ghost.

With a growl John Dement caught up the paper and opened it, his brows lowering like a thunder-cloud as he caught sight of the bold signature appended to the few lines of writing. At a single glance he mastered the contents, for, despite his rough, uncouth manner of expressing himself, he was by no means an uneducated man, then he tossed the note across to Fred Marble, saying in a harsh, strained voice:

"Read it, fri'nd—read it out loud so all kin hear! Ef I was to try, jest now, I'd hev to putt in more cusses then they is words to the thing! Read it out loud, I ax ye, pard!"

Fred Marble hesitated, glancing quickly down the table to where Della and Fergus were seated, but as Dement sharply repeated his demand rather than request, he complied as follows:

"JOHN DEMENT:—

"See how futile are your threats! I punished one, by grazing your thick skull with a bit of lead. Walk steadily and with circumspection, unless you are in love with death. The next bullet will not be wasted, as this is the last warning of

"PRINCE LUCIFER."

Slowly John Dement rose to his feet.

"Them words was writ an' hid under my plate sence a shot was aimed at my life. The man or devil that writ them must be nigh by. I hope he is. I hope he is nigh enough to see my face an' hear the words I'm goin' to speak. I hope he won't lose a single syllable."

"Man or devil, from this time on I'm goin' to stick to business. An' that business is the huntin' out an' roundin' up of the dirty coward that calls hisself Prince Lucifer! They's only one thing that kin hender my runnin' him to earth, an' that is my death. An' ef he is nigh enough to hear my words, he's a bigger fool then devil ef he don't take another shot an' send his lead straighter home than he did the fu'st."

As quickly as he rose, John Dement resumed his seat, all traces of passion vanishing from his face. He seemed to cast aside all thoughts other than how he could best serve and amuse the fair companion he had so adroitly appropriated. And there was something in his manner, smooth and calm though that looked to the outward eye, that kept all present from commenting on the strangely-delivered missive.

Yet, despite the efforts of the host, ably seconded though he was by Fred Marble and others, the feast was hardly enjoyed, and all seemed relieved when the table was abandoned.

With hardly an exception, the guests had half expected to hear another treacherous shot in answer to the rancher's bold defiance.

The uncomfortable chill did not speedily die away, even though John Dement bade the musicians play their liveliest tunes, and though he headed the first set with Queen Kate for his partner, going through the figures with a vigor and heartiness that amply made up for his lack of grace and skill.

Della was looking paler than common, and even stubborn John Dement could not long refuse to recognize the fact that the many trials of that ill-omened evening had severely tasked her powers, both bodily and mental. And when he caught her dark eyes fixed appealingly on his face as Fergus Cameron quietly announced their intention of setting out for their new home without further delay, he yielded assent.

According to custom, all the invited guests had their horses brought out in order to escort the newly-wedded pair to their resting-place, and John Dement lifted Queen Kate into her saddle, stealing a kiss as he did so, then gayly the cavalcade rode away from the Dement Ranch.

An hour later they bade the couple good-night at the New Ranch, half a dozen miles away, turning back to complete the frolic. But before he went, John Dement spoke earnestly to the half-score cowboys who were to remain on the premises as a guard, bidding them sleep not.

CHAPTER VI.

MELANCHOLY MIKE PLAYS THE LIMIT.

"KEEP all eyes open tight, lads," he said, thrusting something that clinked musically into the not unwilling hand of Cinnamon Green, the tall cowboy to whom was intrusted command of the guards. "Tain't no ways likely the dirty whelp'll try to play any more o' his tricks this night, nur yit 'round here, but you won't miss nothin' by losin' a little good sleep. Keep a-stirrin', an' ef ary human critter comes snoopin' 'round the ranch without mighty clean papers to show fer his business, spread him out to dry, an' come to me fer pay. You sabe, boys?"

"Bet we do, boss!"

"They ain't no hoodoo business goin' to throw dirt in our eyes!"

"The fu'st man as winks twice in a hour 'll wake mighty sudden, an' it'll be my teeth that'll be fastened on his fly-flippers, boss!" the tall cowboy grinned, slipping the yellow metal into his pocket.

"Good boys!" with a nod of grim approval, then adding in a still more guarded tone: "Of course it ain't likely, but ef the durned Imps should come too hefty fer the ten o' ye to han'le, jest drap a light in them old sheds, yender," nodding toward the straw-covered racks at some little distance from the ranch proper, and the main outbuildings. "The red light 'll fetch us humpin' this way, red-hot!"

"Mr. Dement!" cried the silvery voice of Queen Kate, cutting short his anxious directions. "Uncle John! if you tarry longer, some of these wicked wretches will carry me off by main force! It's all I can do!"

"Skit-scat, you pesky young tarriers, an' let my pussy cat alone, or they'll be a shower o' red rain over seventeen counties!" cried the rancher rushing to his horse, leaping into the saddle with the ease if not the grace of the lightest swain among them all, and regaining the side of his laughing divinity. "Beauty and the beast run in couples, ever sense the good old fairy days when—Pritty, you got a pin-sticker, an' I knows it! Stiddy, old boy! Kate, you gigglein' sinner, ef you don't let up tryin' to make me break my

old neck, I won't buss ye fer a month o' Sundays—an' they come mighty wide apart in Texas!"

And so, laughing, chaffing, making merry, with here and there a lagging couple riding marvelously close together, but with their bowed heads in still closer proximity, the wedding-party made their way back to the Dement Ranch to finish the "frolic" by dancing away the remaining hours of night.

During the homeward ride, as well as long after the ranch was gained, John Dement seemed almost feverishly gay, with not a thought to trouble him. He rallied the most bashful young men, and bade them follow his example if ever they hoped to gain the good graces of the fair ones. He recorded each change of figure by a resounding smack on lips or brow, front or back hair—as he laughingly declared a kiss was a kiss, let it fall on what soil it might.

And his example was not altogether lost, though, of course, there were none who dared exactly imitate his wild vagaries. But soon all superfluous bashfulness was forgotten, and the young folk went in "for a jolly good time all 'round'!"

There were those, though, who could look below the surface, and who knew that John Dement was heroically playing a part; who knew all this wild jollity was assumed for a purpose: to make his guests enjoy themselves so much as to forget the unpleasant events which had happened.

And then, when the ice was fairly broken, when the tide of fun was flowing smoothly, and there was no longer any danger of the "frolic" turning out a dismal failure, John Dement withdrew from the dance, looking on and adding his mite to the flying wit until he saw that even Queen Kate no longer missed him as one of the dancers. Then he slipped out of doors and stared over the slightly rolling plain in the direction of the New Ranch, where the young married couple had elected to spend the first few days.

"They are happy—Heaven grant that it may last long!"

John Dement started sharply at these words, a hand dropping to a hidden revolver as he wheeled and faced the sober rancher who had been the first to suggest diabolism as the base of that night's work.

"It's you, Pierson!" muttered Dement, with a long breath.

"Come to warn you not to run too many chances, old friend!"

John Dement flashed a swift glance around him, then uttered in a guarded tone of voice:

"The resk don't count, ef I kin keep the pizen imps sneakin' 'bout this ranch! Long as they don't slope over *that* way!" with a short nod toward the New Ranch.

"You are here, and it is the League they are striking at," with a gloomy frown. "The head first, then the branches!"

"The head rests on my two shoulders, an' I ain't ashamed to let the hull kentry know it!" uttered Dement, in a clearer, louder tone, as if he really wished Prince Lucifer or such of his Imps as might possibly be skulking around, to have their last doubts solved. "I'm chief o' the Law an' Order League, an'—"

"Are you mad, man?" angrily muttered Pierson, clapping a hand over the rancher's lips and cutting his words short.

Deftly John Dement freed himself, but he only laughed quietly as he locked arms with the superstitious member of the League and moved toward the house.

"I ain't mad, but I don't want any mistakes made. I've only got my own head to guard, now, while Cameron's got two. You understand?"

And then, with the few graybeards and those who did not dance, John Dement made his way into the supper-room, unceremoniously clearing an ample space for bottles, glasses and boxes of cigars, tobacco and pipes.

"Draw up, fri'nds, an' make merry the best you know how!" he cried heartily, his black eyes all aglow. "This ain't no night fer sleepin', an' them that thinks it, didn't ought to come to a weddin' at old Dement's ranch! The young sprouts is gittin' drunk on love an' dancin', but we old 'coons need somethin' heap more s'archin' in' them. Fill up an' drink good luck and heaps o' happiness to the little gal who's run away from her old dad with a han'somer man—God bless her!"

The toast was honored in silence, but with none the less fervor.

Della was a universal favorite, and the peculiar events of that never-to-be-forgotten night seemed to make each and every heart still more tender and loving toward her.

Outside, the cowboys were making merry after much the same fashion, for John Dement was as generous and open-handed as he was choleric and uncertain of temper.

With whisky in abundance, and cigars without stent, what more could the average "cow-puncher" ask?

But Michael Diggs was not happy nor contented, and though his mates enforced his company for some little time after the return of the escort and giving out of the "enjoyables," he

soon contrived to sneak away, too lovelorn to drink and be merry.

For two long years had he been hopelessly in love with the all but divine Sally, and though he supped principally on sorrow, as far as anything like reciprocation went, he even grew fat on the diet.

He was growing desperate, now. This wed-ding formed too sharp a contrast with his lonely condition. It was not often that a "real dominie" stopped over at the Dement Ranch, and as Sally had time and again declared that no ordinary squire or justice possessed the power essential to bind her future to that of any man, the chance seemed far too precious for wasting.

And thus it came about that, foiled for half a dozen times in his efforts to fairly "round up" his charmer, Melancholy Mike stole away from his merrymaking comrades and made still another attempt on the virgin fortress.

Fortune seemed to be tired of laughing at him, for he found the kitchen door open, and Sarah Stokes sitting alone in stiff and dignified gloom.

"Sally?" the fat cowboy timidly whispered, faltering on the threshold, longing, yet fearing to advance without permission. "Sally, don't squeal! It ain't nobody but me!"

"Sarah was the name I was christened by, an' Stokes the one I was born to," stiffly uttered the virgin, without turning her head. "Gentlemen add Miss to it, but reckless ripples call me Sally."

Certainly not a greeting or reception calculated to enthuse a lover, but still it was better than a peremptory order to vacate, and Melancholy Mike took heart sufficient to enter the kitchen and softly close the door behind him, drawing a long breath of intense relief as not the slightest sound accompanied the last action. And sinking into a chair, beneath which he carefully deposited his slouch hat, the fat cowboy flushed painfully, his poor heart thumping until he grasped the seat of the chair with both hands lest he be lifted clear of it.

"But Sally is sech a sweet name—an' it sounds more friendly, like," he ventured after a brief silence. "Nicknames is so much nicer. When you call me Michael Diggs, I feel so pesky little I want to crawl right down in my boots an' hide in the toe!"

"Of course Mr. Diggs is more proper, and I thank you for correctin' me, Mr. Diggs," stiffly uttered the spinster.

"Durn it all, Sal—Sarah, what's the use o' kickin' a pore feller when he's down an' kivered all over with misery an' wretchedness?" groaned Melancholy Mike, mopping his heated brow, but silently hitching his chair a few inches closer to the one occupied by the virgin. "You know what I mean, but you want to trip me all up an'—"

"Ketch me!" loftily sniffed the spinster.

"Don't I wish I jest could?" desperately blurted out the fat cowboy, jumping at the opening afforded by this familiar expression. "Ain't that jest what I've bin longin' an' prayin' fer these two long years gone by? Ef I could only ketch an' keep you, Sally, I'd count myself the richest, an' I'd be the happiest, man in all the Pan-handle!"

Melancholy Mike caught his breath, and held it until he was almost on the verge of suffocation, too! He was fairly paralyzed by his own audacity, and had the earth opened to swallow him up, or if the roof had opened to admit a thunderbolt, he would hardly have thought it heavier punishment than his speech deserved.

But Sally did not go off into a fit of hysterics, although she did hitch her chair a few inches further away from her audacious wooer, at the same time turning her angular back more squarely toward him. And Melancholy Mike, feeling that he had gone too far to retreat with honor or safety, desperately made up his mind "to play the limit" if he did lose all.

"Sally, it's Heaven's own truth I'm givin' ye," he said, his tones husky and uncertain, his fat face flushing and paling by turns, most uncomfortable chills chasing each other up and down his backbone. "It's two years an' more sence I come here an' fu'st seen you. It's two years an' more sence I told myself ef I couldn't win what I wanted most on earth, I'd live an' die a single man the rest o' my time! An' all of them two years I've bin tryin' to git you to look at the same pictur' I'd like mighty well to paint ef I only knowed how to sling a brush piert enough—a pictur', Sally, which is you an' me an' a little ranch an' a few cattle, an' mebbe, in time, after a while—durn it all to thunder, Sally! Le's git married right now!" he broke off in utter desperation, as that straight, square-shouldered back remained immovable as though carved out of an insensate block.

Sarah Stokes turned squarely around, her hands folded in her lap, her face pale, her sharp nose looking still redder by contrast.

"To hev heathenish monymints an' tombstuns with horrigable words writ onto 'em flung at my head? To hev the Old Boy come caperin' at the weddin', turnin' all to scandal an' 'bomination? To hev shootin' an' bloody murderin' fill the house from sill to saddle-boards? To hev mournin' garniments an' a widder's cap give to me? To hev the grave dug an' me buried all

before I had even time to think of dyin'? Ketch me!"

Stunned by this voluble torrent of words, Melancholy Mike sat in open-mouthed amazement. Until the torrent ceased to flow, until some moments of silence told him that Sally had shot her bolt for the present, he sat thus; but then he plucked up courage, aided by the fact that his goddess was not so offended as to turn her back upon him again.

"But all that's done an' gone, Sally, an' it cain't happen over ag'in, you know."

"Who's to say, when the air is full o' evil powers? An' wicked things that take to themselves names an' titles from the Good Book is stravagin' round about an' upsettin' everybody, body an' wits! An' an angel like Miss Della, too! It's a sin an' a shame—it is so! And a judgment on her for throwin' over Mr. Radford for another man like that grinnin'—Michael! if you ever let out that I said anythin' of the sort, I'll—"

"Ketch me tellin' nothin'!" half-indignantly interposed Melancholy Mike, his honest eyes glowing. "Don't I say the same? Don't I think the little finger o' Oscar Radford is wuth ten thousan' times more'n the hull hide an' taller o' that foreigner? Waal, I jest do!"

"Then you'd ought to be 'shamed o' yourself fer sayin' so, which is awful impudence in one that's hired by her father, an' she marryin' the gentleman you're so 'bominably abusin'!" severely retorted Sally, with true feminine consistency.

"But, Sally, you said—"

"I didn't—an' if I did it ain't no gentleman'd tell me I lied! Right to my own face—an' me a pore, lone woman who—"

Down bent the face and up rose the hands with an apron to meet the moistened eyes and reddened nose. Faintly came the sniffs, softly the hysterical sobs, and each one pierced straight to the love-racked heart of the fat cowboy.

Tears were "a holy terror" to him, as they are to the vast majority of our sex, but the tears of a woman whom he loved with all his heart and soul—the tears of one for whom, without exaggeration, he would willingly have laid down his life if need be!

Poor Michael!

He was miserable, with a wretchedness far beyond the power of words to express. He felt that he was unjustly accused, or else that his memory had suddenly and completely gone back on him. Surely he had not been so outrageously cruel and false as to even hint that his loved one was telling an untruth?

"I never—thought—you'd be so—cruel, Michael!" came through the folds of the apron, indistinctly and broken, but plainly enough for the ears of a true lover to catch.

And the sound of his name—not the prim, formal "Mr. Diggs" with which she had threatened him, but Michael, almost "Mike," as her sobs had separated the syllables—lent the fat cowboy courage to venture still further. He abandoned his chair and dropped on his knees by her side. He even passed an arm about her waist, between it and the chair-back as she leaned forward, and though one of her hands shot swiftly down as though to remove the member, it struggled but faintly as his other hand caught and imprisoned it, lifting it to his lips.

"Quit! Somebody'll come!" she murmured, faintly.

"I cain't quit, Sally, an' you still a-cryin'!" impetuously breathed Melancholy Mike. "Say that you ain't mad, Sally!" and his arm contracted about the square waist until the stiff figure had to bend or break.

"I'll holler if you don't quit—an' me a per-fesser—an' a minister right under the same ruff, too!" gasped Sally, but her struggles were something akin to her voice—faint, very faint, indeed!

Only for his overwhelming love, Melancholy Mike must have noticed this, but the poor fellow was too wholly in earnest to be critical in such an emergency, and so he reluctantly withdrew his arm, beating a retreat when victory awaited him, shattering his dearest hopes by acting as a woman bade him with her lips, instead of as her actions mutely but eloquently hinted.

Only a man wholly, truly in love would have fallen into such an error, but it was a mistake all the same, and poor Mike had to pay the penalty.

Down went the disguising apron, up rose the virginal head, more stiff and frigid than even poor Michael had ever known it, while vinegar and verjuice were as honey and sugar in comparison with her voice:

"I'm ashamed of you, Mr. Diggs, if you hain't got grace to be ashamed of your scandalous self an' scandalouser doin's! The i-de-ah!" and higher rose the red-tipped nose in the air, while the gray eyes seemed to pierce the very ceiling and ascend to heaven in quest of an avenging bolt to wipe out her wrongs and her wronger at one and the same time.

Still on his knees, but with down drooping arms, with fallen jaw and face fairly oozing misery at every pore, poor Melancholy Mike received this cruel sentence without an effort to

dodge or ward it off. And seeing his perfect helplessness, Sally found other words with which to sting him to the quick.

"To sneak in an' take advantage of a pore, lone woman, whose heart was even then bleedin' over the terrible shock it got in ketchin' sight o' that monnymint an' heathen tombstun! When I was grievin' over the sad lot which hes overtuck the sweet angel which I've watched an' tended an' waited on until I was ready to drop down dead in my grave, an' it not dug nor yit the place picked out—for why should it be, an' me livin' still to be shamed an' insulted by a horrid man's comin' in onawares an' hug—*The i-de-ah!*"

Slowly Melancholy Mike rose to his feet as Sally broke off with a gasp for breath. He was very pale for one of his full habit, and his honest eyes were full of a moisture such as strong men are usually ashamed to have seen there. His voice was low and steady when he spoke, and though at his motions Sally turned her sharp eyes upon him with a stony stare, he did not flinch and grow embarrassed as usual.

"Sally, this sort o' thing cain't go on any longer. It's got to come to a head some time, an' I don't reckon they's any better then jest now an' right here. Kin you love me?"

"Ketch me!" sniffed the virgin, tossing her head afresh.

"I'm tryin' to ketch you, the best I know how, Sally," was the even response. "So fur, I ain't made out overly well. Try my best, the rote will crinkle an' twist an' the noose run foul. If I didn't love you hard as even a better man kin love a woman, I'd give up the job long ago as no good but wasted time."

"Somebody's comin'" murmured Sally, but the ruse was wasted.

"Let somebody come, an' ef that somebody's the boss, I don't keer, nur yit stir a inch out o' my tracks ontel you an' I git to a last settlement, Sally," calmly returned the fat cowboy. "I say it ag'in: I love you, Sally, an' I ax you will you marry me honest?"

There came no answer in words, but Sally showed symptoms of beating a retreat into the depths of her apron once more.

"I wouldn't try to crowd ye, Sally," and the cowboy's voice grew more tender, though he still maintained his rigid attitude, only putting both hands behind him as though the better to resist the tempter, "ef you hedn't bluffed me off so often that I'm afraid to give way a inch now I've got my courage up to play the limit. I'd wait fer a time when you was in better humor, an'—"

"To be so insulted!" gasped Sally, sniffing back her tears. "To be called a termagrant an' a common scold!"

"Sally, stick to facts, as I'm stickin' to facts. Look me in the face an' say flat-footed that you don't love me nur never kin, an' I'll end it all in the crookin' of a finger—this way!"

Pale, stern, plainly resolved on keeping his threat to the very letter, Mike clapped a cocked revolver to his temple, gazing straight into the horrified face of his beloved.

"Don't—don't shoot—Mike!" she gasped, faintly.

"You know how to hender me, Sally," slowly. "Ef you don't an' Cain't love me, I'm goin' whar sech things don't trouble. You kin tell 'em I was drunk, or it was a accident, or say that I was gone plum' looney—that's nighest the mark, I reckon. Which is it to be, Sally?"

"Don't shoot—my clean floor—anythin', Mike!" she gasped.

A bright smile swept over the face of the desperate lover, but it vanished as quickly as it came.

"That ain't quite enough, Sally. Will you marry me?"

"Ruther then hev my—Yes!"

And Sally covered her face with her apron, shaking visibly.

Back came the smile, this time to stay; but Melancholy Mike was not yet entirely satisfied. After countless defeats, he was beginning to pluck the fruits of victory, and they were far too sweet for him to rest content with the first taste.

"Sally, it's mighty easy fer a woman to go back onto a barg'in onless it's properly signed and sealed. Ef you mean it, Sally, you won't kick ag'inst doin' that. Ef you won't—then good-by!"

"I mean it—I'll do what you ask, Mike," very meekly.

"Then come an' seal the dockymint, Sally!" with a smothered laugh of joyous triumph. "Shet your eyes ef you're too bashful, honey, but do it, or off goes the hull top o' my head, clean floor or no clean floor!"

And then—but it is too bad!

An hour, two hours, three, and still no report came from the kitchen; and the session was only terminated by an excited alarm from without!

CHAPTER VII.

A NOTABLE NUPTIAL NIGHT.

SIDE by side in the doorway of the "New Ranch" stood the newly wedded couple, smilingly returning the gay good-byes of their merry

escort, and no one who had not been a witness of the strange happenings of that evening, would have suspected the presence of even the ghost of a doubt, the shadow of a fear or unhappiness.

But though all were present—fear, doubt and unhappiness—not a sign was given nor a word spoken aloud that could betray as much. Jest for jest, laugh for laugh the man and wife paid back with interest until the final words were spoken, until Queen Kato called John Dement back to her side from his muttered warning to the cowboy guard, until the merry cavalcade rode swiftly away through the pleasant night, back to the Dement Ranch to finish their "frolic."

Then, with a swift glance around, Fergus Cameron drew his bride a little deeper into the shade cast by the door, clasping her to his breast and pressing his hot lips to hers with a fervor that sent a thrill through her entire being.

"Welcome home, my precious!" he murmured. "For home is where I find you, from now on; and this is home until I can transplant you to Rob Roy Ranch for good and all!"

Della readily understood the allusion, but a few words by way of explanation may stand the reader in good stead.

The change of lovers, the betrothal and wedding, was such a rapid and unexpected transformation scene, that it was impossible to have the bachelor ranch properly arranged for the coming of a fair young mistress under such brief notice. John Dement failed to see why the intervening time could not be spent at his house, but neither Della nor Cameron seemed to fancy this idea. And so, having recently bought out a small rancher whose property cut an ugly little niche into his own grounds, Dement turned the New Ranch, as it was distinguished from the older one, over to Della until Rob Roy Ranch could be put in order.

A pleasant enough home for almost anybody, was this New Ranch, condemned though it was by nearly all of the "old residents" round about, and idiot though the builder had been dubbed from the first. A building of frame was and is a novelty in that section, where nothing less substantial than stone or adobe is thought sufficient or fitting.

But the man who built it was making a home for his wife and little ones, in which he fondly hoped to spend the rest of their natural lives, and it was put up in strict accordance with their views of grace, comfort and utility. The ranch was two stories high, with square roof, topped with a pigeon-box "observatory." The upper rooms were large, airy and convenient, and the entire arrangements were well considered.

Although much of the lumber was cut by himself, with the portable saw-mill which he brought with him, while he was his own architect, superintendent and master-builder, owing to the great cost of hauling and such materials as were essential in such a house, the owner found his little fortune sadly wasted before all was in readiness for his family.

And then—well, sickness came, and death; and what with this and the fretting of a never-contented wife, everything seemed to go crooked, until there was a sale of all and a retreat into oblivion, so far as this story is concerned.

"It ain't no fitten place to live in when the wind begins to come down from the north, but maybe it'll hold together long enough fer you to git time to turn around in," John Dement said, when he turned the New Ranch over to his daughter.

Della made no answer to the speech of her husband, nor did she return his kisses, though neither did she shrink away from them. She felt a sudden sinking at her heart, a choking sensation in her throat, and a dimness came over her eyes.

Fergus Cameron was neither dull nor slow of apprehension, and though not a sound escaped her paling lips, he hastily uttered:

"My poor child! you are beginning to give way to the heavy strain you have so nobly resisted—and little wonder! Only a real heroine could have borne up so long!"

As he spoke, he stooped and picked her up in his arms, holding her across his broad bosom just as a loving parent might hold a little child, and seemingly with just as little effort. And something in the action, or the simple ease, yet tender care with which the deed was accomplished, sent a tear to the eye and a half-sob to the lips of the little bride of an hour. It was so good to have one strong and self-reliant to lean upon! So pleasant to give way and fancy oneself a mere child again, and—

The fancy fled as Fergus Cameron bent his head and once more touched his lips to hers, for that caress was not the placid one which a child receives!

There was a light burning in the hall, and others in the rooms above as well as below, for Cinnamon Green and his mates had been in charge of the place ever since it was first decided upon using it for at least a portion of the honeymoon.

Thus guided, Fergus Cameron carried his bride up the steps and into the airy chamber which Sarah Stokes—with many a gloomy sigh

and gloomier prediction that woe would come of this wedding the wrong man—had arranged for the bridal pair. With one more kiss, he gently deposited Della in a cushioned chair which had come all the way from the far east, smiling upon her as he drew back a little in order to the better gaze into her eyes.

"Welcome home, little stranger!" he uttered, his voice low and full of emotion. "Della," with a sudden change of tone, "you are crying!"

It was useless to attempt a denial, for even as he uttered the charge, twin witnesses fell sparkling to her lap.

"Della—wife!" he added quickly, kneeling before her and looking anxiously up into her face, his own showing very pale. "It is not because of this—not because we are man and wife, now?"

"It's because I'm a poor, weak, silly idiot, Fergus!" Della cried, dashing the tears from her eyes and forcing a laugh that was merry but in name. "It's because I find I'm all nerves, when I have been so proud at the thought I had nothing of the sort. It's because—"

"You have gone through with enough excitement this evening to break down a horse, let alone a little darling like yourself!" broke in Cameron, his face brightening up a little, and his voice growing more natural.

"It was hard—and cruel!"

Fergus Cameron sprung to his feet with clinched hands and flashing eyes, like one who permits a barrier to break away.

"Worse than that, Della—a thousand times worse!" he cried, his blonde brows contracting heavily, his lips parting over his white, even teeth in an almost savage snarl. "I've not forgotten one item! I'll never forget while the merciless demon who—"

"Don't, Fergus! you frighten me!" murmured Della, shrinking back from the man whom she had never even dreamed could look so passionate, so bitterly revengeful.

The frown vanished, the snarl passed away, but the smile was cold and the voice still bard as her husband added:

"I'll not say any more, just now, if you forbid, little angel; but you can't keep me from doing an awful lot of thinking! I never gave it a second thought, so long as I was the only one attacked; but when it comes to your being threatened and tormented, Della—it's too much!"

"Who do you think it was?" slowly asked Della, forgetting her entreaty almost as soon as uttered. "What cause—what reason could he or they have for such abominable trickery and cruelty?"

There was a brief pause, as though he wished to shape his words in such a manner as to avoid giving offense, while still expressing his views. And when he did speak, Fergus Cameron was grave and almost stern.

"Della, if you had not been included in those vile insults and menaces, it wouldn't be so difficult to give you an answer. If only your father and myself: as we are head men in the efforts to put down this outlaw gang under Prince Lucifer, an assault upon either of us could easily be explained. As it is—you will not take offense?"

"I don't understand you, Fergus!"

"Well, I can't help but believe what your father said when back yonder—when we were discussing that abominable gift—has a foundation on truth!"

"You mean?" faltered Della, shrinking just a trifle.

"That at least part of it is purely spite work. That one of the fellows whom you rejected is trying to get even in this meanly underhand way!" impetuously cried Cameron, frowning darkly.

"But who—I can't imagine—"

"Della, you have known me long enough to be sure that I would scorn to aim a blow at the back of any man, no matter how bitterly I disliked him. You know that I would not readily suspect a man who might be innocent. And, knowing that you know this, I'll tell you now what I did not choose to whisper to others. Before Heaven, I believe that the one who called himself Prince Lucifer—who captured us by such cunning treachery, first rendering our weapons harmless, then waylaying us just when most off our guard—who covered us with shame and humiliation, thanks to his hired ruffians, sending us on to bring shame upon you, my darling! Before Heaven, I believe that villain was none other than Oscar Radford!"

Della started up from her seat, with a little cry of genuine astonishment, not wholly free from indignation.

"You are crazy, Mr. Cameron!" she ejaculated, flushing hotly. "When all that happened, Oscar was at our house! He came just after noon, and I hardly lost sight of him until you came home! Impossible!"

"You are quite sure, Della?" he slowly asked, his handsome face turning paler than ever, his blue eyes glowing vividly. "You can swear that Oscar Radford did not steal away long enough to—"

"Ask any one who was at the house—ask further, if you can't take my word for such a simple thing, Fergus!"

"I don't doubt you, Della," he interposed, catching her hands and dropping a deft kiss upon her flushed face. "I am sorry that I permitted my surprise to get the better of my politeness even for a moment, and I most humbly beg your pardon."

"It is *his* pardon you should ask, rather!" with still a trace of resentment in her face and tones. "The idea! Oscar Radford!"

"Let it drop for the present, little wife," was the calm, almost cold response as he dropped her hands and rose erect. "To-morrow I will tell you my reasons for so readily doubting your paragon."

"Fergus!"

"Another slip of the tongue?" with a short laugh. "Well, it must be that even I have nerves that can shiver beneath so many ugly surprises, Della. Anyway, we'll not quarrel so soon?"

As he spoke his arms once more infolded her half-shrinking form, and before he lowered her to the easy-chair again, his hot lips pressed hers time and again. Whatever might be his jealous doubts, it was plain to be seen that Fergus Cameron loved the wife he had so unexpectedly won.

"I'll take a look about the premises, just to see that everything is in order, little angel," he smiled, half-turning toward the door. "It is not at all likely that our satanic friend will attempt any further annoyance this night, but all the same I'm going to set a guard that will trouble even him, fiend as he delights in calling himself, to pass without being called to a sharp account."

Wafting a kiss toward her from the tips of his fingers, Fergus Cameron left the chamber and ran lightly down-stairs, his mellow whistle ringing out musically as he retreated.

Left alone, the young bride covered her face with her hands, her head bowing low, her lithe figure quivering with strong emotion.

Possibly it was that sudden allusion to Oscar Radford on the part of her husband—how strange that title seemed when coupled with the owner of the Rob Roy Ranch!—or the charge which she knew to be entirely without foundation, that brought his face and memory back to her with such painful clearness just now.

It was the same haunting doubt—the same fear, rather—that had turned her face so pale back at the home ranch. A fear that now grew into a conviction of truth!

She knew, now that she was irretrievably bound to another, that her whole heart, her entire love, belonged to the man whom she had sent from her in a poor, miserable, causeless quarrel. She knew now, what she had known all along, and never the more certainly when she was stubbornly denying it to herself, that she loved Oscar Radford a thousand-fold better than she did the man whom she had wedded; that Oscar Radford owned her heart, even more wholly than Fergus Cameron owned her hand.

She knew this, but even now she stubbornly fought against the admission. Even now she tried to deny the truth, and as far as her lips went she succeeded.

"I don't—I never did care for him!" she panted, hardly conscious of the fact that she was speaking aloud. "It was nothing more than a silly flirtation on my side—on *his* side, too! Or he wouldn't have given me up so easily!"

Despite herself this sentence followed, and sobs racked her form.

If he had not been so proud and unbending! If he had given way, ever so slightly! Why couldn't he see? Why was he so blind? He must have known that she was only trying her power over him, just as she had tested it a hundred times before. He must have known that she was only waiting for him to give way a little, so that she could forgive him, and with him enjoy the sweet reconciliation that, more than aught else, led her to quarrel with him!

"So he would, but he wanted an excuse to break off for good!" she muttered, lifting her head, the hot fire in her eyes drying up all tears as though they had never been. "And I was glad—I am glad! I hate the very thoughts of him, and I love Fergus! I do—I will love him!"

Passionately the words broke from her lips, as though the poor child felt that she could carry conviction to her own soul.

"You don't—you never will love Fergus!" came a clear, metallic voice to her ears.

With a gasping cry Della turned toward the door, her dark eyes opening widely with amazement and horror as they fell upon a truly ominous figure standing just within the chamber.

Just such a figure as David Ashbrook had that evening described when narrating the curious manner in which he came to bring the garb of a widow as a gift to a bride.

There was the dark cloak, partly flung back to leave the right hand and arm free, though the left hand evidently held the other side, and in such a manner that only a portion of the breast and the one arm were open to view of the startled young bride.

There was the startlingly red face and neck, with the curling mustache and pointed tuft on the sharp chin; the curiously oblique eyes and the long, thin nose; and from the temples, cov-

ered with black, close-curling hair, rose short, pointed horns!

Truly, an ugly visitor for a bridal chamber!

"You do not, you never will love Fergus Cameron best!" repeated Prince Lucifer, and though his tones were strangely musical, they contained an ugly sneer that stung sharply. "You speak falsely when you say so, and the best part of it all is that you know you are lying!"

The surprise, almost superstitious terror, which had first seized upon her as she caught sight of that ill-omened shape, and which had bound her tongue as with a magic spell, was rapidly giving way to indignation as she listened to those insulting words. And half-rising from her seat, Della started to call aloud on her husband, when Prince Lucifer suddenly flung up his right hand.

Before a sound could escape her lips, a heavy muffler was flung over the bride's head from behind, and strong hands grasped her in such a manner that she was perfectly helpless, struggle as she might and did.

Those struggles were brief. She had fallen into the power of those who had no delicate scruples to hamper their movements, and they used the poor child quite as unceremoniously as they might have handled a strong man. A few seconds during which it seemed as though the breath must be pressed out of her, if not the spark of life, with it, then she was reseated in her chair and deftly bound there.

She felt human hands passing over her face beneath the muffler, and as she caught a gasp of air, she strove to emit a cry that would warn her husband of her sore extremity: but a tight grip on her swelling throat checked this hope, and then she felt a gag being pressed between her teeth.

The muffler was lifted from over her face, and the first object that met her gaze was Prince Lucifer, standing just where he stood when she first caught sight of him, with arms folded across his chest, and a mocking smile playing about his thin lips.

"Thank yourself for this unceremonious treatment, dear lady," he uttered, with a mock bow as he slowly advanced to pause only a few feet from her chair. "That is the great fault which mars the fair sex: they never know when to hold their tongues!"

Then a strange thing happened. Della seemed to hear the voice of Fergus Cameron charging Oscar Radford with being Prince Lucifer! And instantly her terror died away, her eyes regained their usual keenness, and her whirling train steadied, growing clear and active!

Just at that moment she had no thought for herself. She felt no dread of physical harm. She forgot that she was a helpless prisoner, and that sudden death might befall her husband should he return.

She only remembered that accusation, and the pain it had caused her. Only remembered that this was Prince Lucifer; forgetting how plainly David Ashbrook had proved that the mask by whom he had been stopped could not possibly be the same mask who had captured Fergus Cameron and his companions. Only thought that now she could forever set at rest all such shameful slanders against the man whom she loved above all others on earth!

For as she gazed, keenly, clearly, resolved to learn the truth, she knew that that scarlet and jet figure could not possibly be Oscar Radford, though the height and weight seemed near enough alike; for this Prince Lucifer was no man at all, but a woman!

"It was false, as I said!" she mentally cried, her dark eyes filling with a light so vivid that Prince Lucifer involuntarily started back and glanced swiftly toward the door, as though expecting a surprise. "He is innocent! This is a woman!"

Prince Lucifer quickly rallied, and again addressed his captive.

"You laughed at the prediction which met your gaze in marble, fair one of the jetty curls, but for all that it is bound to come true! It will be fulfilled to the very letter! You have wedded Fergus Cameron. You are a bride—the bride of an hour! You will die—to him! You are dead to him from this moment on! With the coming dawn, Della Dement Cameron is dead to all who greeted her as such, although it is highly probable that she will live for another, and as another! Can you read my riddle, dear child? Do you understand the meaning of that inscription now?"

With a low mocking laugh Prince Lucifer asked the questions as he stood with folded arms before her, plainly reveling in a revenge such as only one utterly heartless could appreciate.

"You do not speak, but I will answer for you, little one," Prince Lucifer added, in the same mocking tones. "You are laughing in your heart for pure joy! A newly-wedded wife, yet you hate your husband to the full as completely as you love another. Shall I whisper his name? Bah! what need? It is written on your brow, and I am a devil. Being such, I can see and comprehend what is a mystery to mortals. I can see the well-spring of joy that is bubbling up in your silly heart at my words—at the words of Prince Lucifer, the fallen archangel!"

"Queer, isn't it?" with a low, sneering laugh.

"The devil isn't always as black as painted, especially when he takes the trouble to dissolve a tie that, even in one short hour, has grown terribly galling, is he?"

"You poor, silly fool!" and words never contained more perfect contempt than these. "Do you think for one moment that I am taking all this trouble and running all this risk for *your* sake? You are nothing more than a worthless side issue in the great game I am playing! It is easier to take you from *his* hands alive than it is to kill you, besides being a great deal more profitable. It is not that I love *you*, but that I hate *him*! That I—"

Prince Lucifer broke off abruptly, half-turning his head as a musical sound came floating through the air. It was the mellow whistle of Fergus Cameron, and from the sounds the young Scotchman was just re-entering the building.

Della also caught the sound, and a vivid light leaped into her eyes as Prince Lucifer sprung back a pace or two. There was a smile of mockery on his face as it turned toward her again when he paused with back to the wall, close beside the door.

Nearer came the whistle, until Cameron flung open the door, to utter a sharp cry of angry amazement as he saw his wife in bonds.

CHAPTER VIII.

PRINCE LUCIFER SWEEPS THE BOARD.

"DELLA, what on earth has happened—who has dared to—"

Before Fergus Cameron could complete the sentence; before he could fairly recover from that first shock of seeing his young bride in such a strange and hapless plight, her one chance was lost.

With a silent, panther-like movement Prince Lucifer sprang upon the young rancher from behind, a heavy revolver glittering in his dark gloved hand. And before Cameron could correctly interpret the wildly warning light in his wife's dark eyes, the pistol butt fell upon his skull, and he staggered forward like a drunken man.

Dropping the weapon, Prince Lucifer leaped upon the back of his second victim, clutching at his throat, a snarling sound coming from beneath his red mask. And then Della Cameron closed her eyes with a soul-sickening shiver of horror as she saw the twain fall to the floor, her husband undermost.

Even as her brain whirled dizzily, she was conscious that other figures were brushing swiftly past her, and opening her eyes, she saw Prince Lucifer just rising to his feet, giving way to several dark cloaked shapes, no doubt the same to whom she owed her bonds.

She saw that Fergus Cameron made no motion, no attempt to regain his feet as Prince Lucifer parted from him, and she caught herself vaguely, as one in a dream, wondering if he was really dead, butchered before her very eyes!

"The bride of an hour! The bride of an hour!"

The words floated through her brain, back and forth. It seemed as though she was in a half-dream, listening to distant, softened, but marvelously distinct voices singing; and that was the never changing burden of their song.

"The bride of an hour!"

She saw it now, as she had gazed upon it carved in marble, but she realized the meaning of the words far more completely than she had at that time, when they were both free and happy, strong and unharmed.

Prince Lucifer picked up the revolver he had dropped, and closed the door left open by the entrance of Fergus Cameron, after pausing a second with slightly inclined head, as though listening for some possible alarm from below. But all was silent. Remarkably little sound had accompanied that swift struggle and capture, and it was plain that the cowboy guard under Cinnamon Green had heard nothing to awaken their suspicions.

With a smile upon his scarlet face that seemed truly satanic, and a vivid glow in his oblique eyes, Prince Lucifer stood with folded arms, watching his Imps as they deftly, rapidly secured the prostrate man.

This was accomplished before the rancher recovered sufficiently to offer any assistance, and then the Imps faced their chief and appeared to be awaiting his further instructions.

Prince Lucifer lifted his right hand, and though he spoke not a word that the half stupefied bride could catch, his satellites appeared to comprehend him as though an entire as clearly volume of directions had issued from his lips.

One of their number brought a second easy-chair, placing it close to that occupied by the girl-wife, but partly facing it. The rest of the Imps picked up Fergus Cameron and placed him in this chair, holding him erect, while one of their number quickly bound him therein with a long and supple coil of rope.

Once more the Imps stood in line, gazing upon their master. Another motion of his gloved hand, and after a low bow of obedience they passed silently, swiftly beyond Della's range of vision. Whither they went, or if they still remained in the same chamber, she had no means of determining, even if she had made the effort.

Mechanically her gaze had followed the moving of the body of her husband, that strange, listless apathy still enchaining her senses. Only for one thing it is likely that her gaze would have passed on to follow the moving figures until they filed out of sight, for just then her brain was a blank, her mind no better than that of an infant just beginning to take notice of moving objects. But as she saw the white lids quiver and then part; as she saw the blue eyes stare blankly, only to light up with fire and animation as they rested upon her face, almost directly opposite them; as she realized that Fergus Cameron was not dead, but living and growing conscious—her powers of mind and reason were restored to her in a flash.

A low, mocking laugh made her shiver and shrink back as far as the cunningly-applied bonds would permit, and with a sensation of chilling fear she looked toward Prince Lucifer. Never until that moment had she fully realized what it might be to fall into such hands.

Fergus Cameron also turned his eyes in that direction, and as he seemed to recognize the shape, his face flushed redly, his veins swelled on throat and temple, his muscular frame quivered from top to toe with the desperate efforts he made to burst his bonds, to eject the gag that held his tongue as helpless as were his limbs.

"So near, and yet so far!" mockingly laughed the scarlet demon, as he carelessly moved a little nearer, posing so that the two captives could watch him without turning their heads. "One little cry, and your cow-punching vagabonds would come rushing to the rescue like a cyclone boiled down and cut up into chunks to represent the form divine! And to think how utterly unable you are to give that signal!"

Another laugh, as mocking as it was musical; free of apprehension as though the author knew there was not a being within a thousand miles save those who were wholly devoted to himself.

So it seemed to Della, and something of the same sort must have struck Fergus, for with a choking groan he ceased his vain efforts and suffered his strained muscles to relax.

"Pray don't stop on my account, dear fellow!" laughed Prince Lucifer, turning to draw a chair nearer, seating himself with heels hitched on a round, his elbows supported by his elevated knees. One hand served as a support to his pointed chin, while the other with careless grace clasped the edges of the dark cloak together as his forearm rested across his knees.

"Really, I am in no particular hurry, and I rather like to see you kick against the pricks, do you know?" the scarlet demon drawled with an insolent laziness that stung far more sharply than fiercer words. "It is such a delicious contrast to the actions which you declared you would perform the next time you were given a chance at the thieving rascal, Prince Lucifer! And, candidly, I find the interview much better to my liking than I feared would be the case, after I saw and heard you when the League was last in session!"

Fergus Cameron shivered as he glared with impotent fury at that mocking demon, so near, and yet so immeasurably beyond his reach. If he could only burst those cords! If he could only grasp that throat with the sharply divided line of scarlet and black—only for a single instant of time!

"You would do your level best to twist my neck, no doubt," Prince Lucifer uttered with a mocking smile, as though he possessed the power of reading all that passed within that brain. "You would forget all the vows you uttered; you would forget how you swore to your fellow leaguers to make me die a thousand deaths in one—to draw out the torture until the debts recorded against my name and the names of my gentle Imps were doubly wiped out! Bah! poor fool!" with sudden scorn in tone, voice and gesture.

"You threatened bravely when you were surrounded by your fellow bloodhounds. You blustered loudly when you felt that there was not one chance in a thousand of my ever learning how you worried my name, and not one chance in ten thousand of ever meeting me face to face as man to man!"

"Yet all the time I was within hearing distance. I was gazing full in your face, and more than once while you were vaporizing thus your eyes gazed fairly into mine. Ha!" with a low, mocking laugh as Cameron gave a little start, as his blue eyes changed expression, and then turned upon the pale face of his young wife. "Does that amaze you, gentle bloodhound? Does it sound incredible that I should move and mingle with those who are banded together for my particular undoing? Bah! you forget that my name is Prince Lucifer!"

But for once the scarlet demon made a misinterpretation. It was not this that caused Fergus Cameron to glance toward his wife, nor this that made her eyes droop before his blazing orbs.

Even Della recognized what seemed the echo of a voice that had recently been—that still was—very dear and sweet to her! Not at first—not until the man in the scarlet and jet disguise grew more in earnest and, as it seemed, less

guarded. An echo that sounded like the voice of Oscar Radford.

So like, that for a brief space her eyes drooped, her heart turning sick and faint within her bosom. So like that once again she could hear the earnest words of her husband, declaring before high heaven that Oscar Radford was none other than the demon who had set the entire Pan-handle on fire, who had so cruelly marred that evening's pleasure, who had crowned all with this dastardly outrage!

But only for a moment did her faith shiver. It could not be true! This was not Oscar Radford, but a woman in body, if a fiend in character!

She tried to convey as much to Fergus, but his glowing eyes were turned upon Prince Lucifer, and mechanically she looked in the same direction. She tried to confirm the belief which had come to her during those first moments, but somehow there seemed a change, an alteration, and it was in vain that she looked for those feminine signs which had seemed so very plain before.

The masked being was nearer her now than then, and surely there should not be such a change wrought by the simple act of sitting in place of standing erect?

The figure, the size, the general shape, as well as the voice! And yet—it could not, it was not Oscar Radford!

So she mentally declared, and so she strove to believe. Yet—as Prince Lucifer spoke again, there was still that haunting echo!

"You put yourself forward as a sort of champion, Fergus Cameron," he said, in a cold, hard tone that was in strong contrast to the mocking ones he had until then preferred. "You went out of your way to raise a hue-and-cry against me and mine, since I had not troubled your stock in the least. You and John Dement took the lead, and on your heads the first and heaviest punishment shall fall!

"It seemed such an easy, simple thing for your band of bloodhounds to sweep all such chaff as us from your path as soon as you were once fairly organized. You looked upon it much as you might upon a grand battue, where all the sport was to be on the side of the hunters, little expecting the scorned game would turn at bay, much less turn the hunters into the hunted; yet just this has come to pass.

"Easily enough, too!" with a short, disagreeable laugh. "The boasting words had hardly time to cool upon your lips before the scorned cattle-thief captured three of the leading spirits in that organization. You know what followed, so I need not waste time and breath in telling of your disgrace. You received a lesson, and were sent on to keep your pleasant appointment, as a warning to John Dement and the rest of the bloodhounds.

"When we parted, I told you that it was barely possible that I might be one of the guests, and even that came to pass. My hands placed that monument among the other presents, even as my brain designed and my hands executed the work. It was my hand that cut short the loud and blustering defiance of John Dement, who little dreamed that the one he thought to mock was within hearing. It was my hand that wrote and placed the note of warning beneath the rancher's plate; and I laughed in my sleeve at the rage and consternation which ensued.

"More than that, Fergus Cameron!" and somehow that echo grew more and more recognizable as the scarlet demon spoke rapidly, seeming to warm with the subject, to forget the guard he had at first placed upon his voice and demeanor. "All this was but preliminary work, simply put in as a means of showing how little worth were all your secret meetings, your high-sounding oaths and vows, your bombastic proclamations! A little by-play to show how we Imps of the Pan-handle laugh such men as you to scorn. And then I got down to pure business.

"You are in my power. Your trusted guards are swilling down the whisky you gave them to keep them on the alert, but which my hand first drugged heavily. Ha!" with a short, exultant laugh as Cameron started and once more strove desperately to break free. "That stings you? And yet it is nothing but the simple truth.

"By this time one-half of your boasted body-guard are helplessly drunk, though you were careful to measure out their portions, giving enough, but not too much, as you laughingly explained. The rest are so near gone, that even were you to lift your voice and call to them for aid, they would hardly be able to answer, much less stand against me and my gentle Imps.

"Why have I gone to all this trouble? Well the cards have dropped so luckily, everything has run on so charmingly, that I would be worse than a churl to refuse the information which your eloquent eyes are asking, dumb though your tongues be.

"Partly as a professional, as I explained before; but that was not my sole, hardly my principal reason. I hate you on more scores than one, Fergus Cameron!" with a sudden increase of rancor in voice and eyes. "You have stolen the dearest treasure from an honest man—one as high above you in every respect as

heaven is above the earth! You sowed discord between two loving, if hasty, hearts, and then stepped in to carry off the prize which should have been another's. Not that I am setting myself up as love's champion. My tastes little run in that direction," with a short, mocking laugh. "But I am an admirer of fair play, and it was through the vilest of foul play that you won."

"An example had to be made of a prominent member of your order, if the Imps were to live and flourish. You thrust yourself forward, and in selecting you for that example, I kill two birds with one stone.

"As for you, fair lady," bowing with an air of mock deference toward Della, "a different fate is reserved. You are precious in a double sense. In the one which most nearly interests the Imps, whom I represent, you are literally worth your weight in gold. And you will never see your worthy parent again this side of the grave, until that amount is paid down on the nail in good, lawful money! Of course it will be a terrible tug at my poor heart-strings to bid you adieu, after having you for a guest in the mean time, but—money talks. Money rules the world! And, Imps though we are, we are still too nearly human to let mere sentiment outweigh such a neat chunk of the yellow metal.

"As for you, Fergus Cameron," his mocking tones changing to cold and merciless hatred. "You will be left behind as a beacon light, as a red-hot warning to your fellow bloodhounds! You are free to tell them all I have told you, in case you feel inclined—or able."

Something in the last words, something in the pause which preceded them, sent a cold thrill of horror through the veins of the girl-wife, and then her overtired senses gave way. Her head drooped forward, her eyes closed and she lay unconscious.

Demon though he saw fit to proclaim himself, Prince Lucifer acted very human as he noticed this swoon, springing from his chair and dropping on his knees before that in which Della rested, pushing back her head, parting her lids and gazing anxiously into her eyes, pressing one ear over her heart. And he drew a long breath as he rose to his feet.

"Nothing but a faint spell, my dear fellow," he laughed as he looked down upon the white, strained face of the husband. "It comes in admirable time, and affords a prime excuse for sparing you both the pain of parting with a farewell sigh and plaint!"

He raised his right hand, and instantly one of the black-masked Imps glided across the chamber and passed down-stairs.

"By this time your noble body-guard has surrounded enough of my drags to make them easily handled, and there is no use in wasting more time which can be so much more profitably employed. Take your last look upon that fair face, Fergus Cameron," with a mocking wave of his sable-gloved hand. "You will never see her again this side of the grave, at least!"

Another lifting of his hand, and the other Imps issued from their place of hiding, and deftly cast off the rope that held Fergus Cameron in the chair. Then they lifted him in their arms, still bound hand and foot, bearing him to the bridal couch, placing him upon it, then falling back to await the further commands of their chief.

"John Dement bade your guard send up a red light in case there should any trouble come to you, Fergus Cameron," uttered Prince Lucifer in slow, measured accents. "He would be on the lookout, he said. It would be a pity to let his vigilance go unrewarded, and shortly after we fit from New Ranch, the red cock will send out its crimson warning.

"John Dement will ride in hot haste, but unless he has better stock than any I saw while making my little tour of inspection, purely in the way of business, mind you, he will hardly get here in time to save his worthy son-in-law!"

As he concluded, Prince Lucifer drew the end of a sheet over the face of the helpless captive, shutting out his sight, leaving only his sense of hearing and sense of smell to tell him what was going on in the bridal chamber.

He could hear a gentle but brisk bustling to and fro of light-footed Imps. And then he caught the pungent scent of petroleum!

Prince Lucifer seemed satisfied that his men knew their duty, and that they were fully competent to perform it without supervision, for as the Imp returned from below, making a quick sign, he freed the still unconscious Della from her chair, and motioning the Imp to follow with her in his arms, he left the chamber without another glance toward the bridal couch which bade fair to prove a funeral pyre!

Down the stairs and out into the fresh, cool night air he strode, followed by the Imp bearing the girl-wife in his muscular arms. Out into the moonlight he passed, seeming to have no fear of discovery or of danger from the cowboy guard.

Nor need he have!

The drugged liquor which was to quicken the wits and sharpen the eyes of the body-guard, apparently had produced just the opposite effect. Here and there they lay limply stretched out on the ground, snoring dully, heavily. And as Prince Lucifer passed from one to another, kick-

ing them scornfully, not a moan nor a protest told that they were conscious of or resented the indignity.

Prince Lucifer had scarcely completed this tour of inspection when his Imps came downstairs and awaited his further instructions.

"One of you bring up the animals, and the rest collect these fellows in a pile. Make sure they are all accounted for, and then prepare for the road. You understand; two are to remain to set the red cock to crowing at the proper time, while the rest break the trail after the regular fashion."

While he was speaking, the Imp who bore Della Cameron in his arms made a sign which the chief caught, and he turned toward him, a bright light reflecting from his eyes as the rays of the clear moon fell athwart his scarlet mask.

"You are waking up, little lady!" he half-laughed, as he peered into the face of his captive. "Well, I would have preferred a little longer nap, but your sex were ever contrary! Still, it matters not. You will be less bother, since now you can sit a horse without being held in the saddle. Ungallant! Well, this is business, not pleasure!"

Prince Lucifer turned away toward the horses which were being led toward them, and himself looked to the equipments of one, which had clearly been provided for the captive beforehand. Under his supervision, Della was placed in the saddle and fastened to the seat by a long, silken sash.

"That will chafe less than a lariat, and is almost as strong," the scarlet demon laughingly explained. "You see, it is not every day that one has the exquisite pleasure of being escort to a young lady who is literally worth her weight in gold, and when one does one naturally feels inclined to guard against any possible wear and tear."

As he spoke, he sprung lightly into his own saddle, and knotted the halter-strap of the other animal to his saddle-bow. Grasping the free reins with his left hand, and keeping the spirited pony close beside him, he made a parting signal to his Imps, and then dashed rapidly away from the New Ranch, heading to the northwest.

That was a wild, nightmare ride to poor Della, though she hardly realized the full extent of her peril, hardly realized all that had and was yet to happen. Though her senses had returned, they were thick and foggy. She was more like one in a half-waking dream than one fully alive to her miserable situation.

On and on, for ages it seemed; then Prince Lucifer abruptly drew rein in the faint dawn, pointing back to a red glow in the sky:

"Look, my beauty! By this time you are a widow!"

CHAPTER IX.

"THOU ART THE MAN!"

It was this same lurid light that gave rise to the alarm which cut short the session between the fat cowboy and his bony charmer. It was this lurid glow, rising and showing plainer and more distinct with the passage of each moment, that caught the wandering eyes of one of the carousers at Dement Ranch.

"Tain't the sun, fer the night ain't gone yet!" he self-communed, in his owlish wisdom. "Tain't the moon, fer thar she is, chuck full, 'n' I wish I was, too! Tain't the roarin' boarin' Alice, fer the summer hain't played yit! Tain't nothin' but a durned ole fire somewhar' ruther, 'n' I kin prove it."

"Who's afire, Danny?" called out one of his mates, who caught the concluding sentence. "Come an' take a hair o' the dog what bit ye, ef ye want to putt out your fire."

"Let him went! Don't ye see Dan's sick-drunk, an' he's a-huntin' a hole fer to cache his licker?" laughed still another.

Dan was some three parts drunk, it is true, and therefore just in a condition to turn contrary. He was ordered to come in, so he determined to stay out. He was declared drunk, and consequently it was his duty to prove to all, both friends and enemies, that he alone of all the party was perfectly sober and vigilant.

And this being the case, with that red light still the most prominent before his dazed eyes, he braced his legs, tipped back his head and belled forth:

"Fire! The New Ranch is red-hot, an' still a-heatin'!"

That tremendous effort completed the overthrow begun by whisky, and Danny fell backward with "a sullen thud." And almost before his body was stretched out on the ground he was snoring away without a thought or care to trouble him.

And so it was that a drunken man sounded the alarm that the "red cock" was crowing from the roof-tree of the New Ranch!

A single breath of stupor, of chilling paralysis, of sickening apprehension. Then the voice of John Dement rang out, deep, hoarse, full of vengeance such as few men can either feel or express. Then the hasty rush of strong men to clear the building. Then the agitated cries of startled, frightened women as they clung to their lovers or relatives, fearing not for them-

selves but for their dear ones, yet not knowing what cause there could be for such fears.

John Dement was the first one clear of the jam, for he at least had not hesitated to use his heavy fists in clearing the passage for himself. One breathless look in the direction of the New Ranch, and a hot curse broke from his paling lips.

"To your critters, all ye who calls yourselves men!" he cried, himself leaping toward the stables where the animals used by the merry escort to the newly wedded pair were secured. "It's at the New Ranch, dead sart'in, but the boys'll hold the devils level ontel we kin ketch up. They've got to!"

Excited as he was, filled with a savage rage that only blood could fully quench, John Dement was still enough master of his actions to keep from leaping on his good horse without losing time in saddling and bridling it. He was cool enough to know that in a case like this, when a life might hang on the winning of a score seconds, headlong haste is not always the quickest.

"Saddle an' bit, men!" he cried, his own fingers flying with incredible rapidity, drawing cinches tight and securing buckles. "Mcbe they'll be a chase at the other eend! Anyway, a second lost now is heap better than a minnit lost by a turnin' saddle or a bridle slippin' on the road! Foller hot-foot as soon as yo kin—it's the little gal that's callin' ye fer help!"

Into the saddle and away over the slightly-rolling plain, his eyes riveted on that red glow in the sky, now spreading wider and mounting higher. No fire of prairie grass. He did not even try to cheat himself into this belief. He knew that this lurid glow came from a fire kindled purposely by human hands. He remembered the parting words he had muttered to Cinnamon Green, and tried to believe that this was but in obedience to that warning charge.

"It's the old hay-sheds!" he muttered through his tightly-clenched teeth as he sped on, his unarmed heels rapping against the ribs of his willing steed at every long leap. "It ain't the house. It looms up too fast fer that, though it's a shell that—"

With a fierce oath he cut the sentence short. He would not give the terrible thought utterance even in a denial.

The heavy quirt, which he had caught up when leaving the stable, hissed through the air and stung against the haunches of his snorting steed. Again and again the cruel lash fell, although the animal was already straining every nerve, every muscle, running as it never ran before, as it would never run again. They were covering the rolling ground almost with the rapidity of a skimming swallow, yet to the tortured father it seemed as though their pace was that of a snail!

If he could have known it, Prince Lucifer might well have laughed in sardonic glee, for his enemy was undergoing tortures far worse than any that could accompany death.

After John Dement, strung out in accordance with the speed of their animals, or their activity in getting ready for the mad chase, came the wedding guests, their faces hard-set, their eyes filled with mingled apprehension and a lust for vengeance, their hands now and then seeking their weapons, as though anticipating the struggle which might await their arrival on the scene.

But John Dement never cast a backward glance to make sure his neighbors were within supporting distance. He had eyes only for the lurid light before him. He had thoughts only for Della, his last remaining hope on earth.

"She's all right! Fergus ain't no fool! The boys'll easy hold 'em level, though the imps come in a swarm! They cain't no harm come to the little woman! She's all right!"

Della! She was the beginning and the end of all his thoughts during that mad race against time. And as though to cheat his own bitter fears, over and over again he repeated the sentence:

"She's all right!"

Over and over again he caught himself muttering that the red glow only came from the hay-covered sheds built as wind-breaks for the stock in winter; that it could not possibly be the ranch itself that flung out the blood-red beacon for that would prove the work of an enemy, and the fire was surely kindled by Cinnamon Green. Yet the wild, gasping cry that escaped his lips as he rose the swell from whence he could catch the first glimpse of the New Ranch, told how little faith he had in his own assertion.

"I knowed it! It's only the sheds! Whooray!"

Standing out clear and distinct in the red light he saw the New Ranch, still intact, still unharmed. Saw it for one breathless, glorious, ecstatic moment. Then his head drooped, his brain whirled, his eyes filled with a dancing light still more blinding than that on which they gazed. He reeled in the saddle, and only saved himself from falling to the ground by clutching his pomme convulsively.

Ringing cheers came back from his followers as they caught his exultant, relieved cry, but he hardly heard them. Brief though that mad ride had been, it contained the wear and tear of a dozen years.

. Not until his panting, trembling steed paused, within a few yards of the ranch did John Dement recover from that sudden revulsion sufficiently to wonder why all was so silent about the place. But as his closest followers came dashing up, he glanced around him with a bewildered air.

"Whar be they? Whar's Dell? Whar's Cameron? What's gone o' all the boys? It's turned queer what—"

The fire-brand had wrought its work. The hay-covered sheds were in ruins, and the red light was dying down. But then a smart gust of wind came whirling by, tossing aside the black ashes, lifting a layer of still glowing hay, sending a ruddy light over the premises. And by this light the bewildered rancher caught sight of the cowboys lying in a regular row on the ground, just where the Night-Imps of the Pan-handle had ranged them in obedience to their chief.

"Dead—butchered!" he gasped, staring stupidly at the motionless figures.

But then a choking cry burst from his ghastly lips as he leaped from the saddle and rushed into the house.

"Dell—my little gal!"

Such of the wedding guests as had arrived, followed him closely with weapons ready drawn, though the perfect silence that reigned about the New Ranch told them that if an enemy was there, he had also departed.

Up-stairs and into the bridal chamber rushed John Dement, almost beside himself with a horrible fear. Up to the bed on which a human form was outlined against the snowy covering, little light though there came through the windows. Only one—and that a man!

"Whar's my child? Whar's my little Della?" the rancher hoarsely gasped, clutching the shape and shaking it with savage vehemence.

He felt it quiver and tremble under his clutch, but there came no answer. He bent closer, and as another red gleam came in through the unshuttered windows, he saw that it was Fergus Cameron, his eyes wildly staring, his jaws filled with a gag!

The old man reeled back, sinking into a chair, sick and faint. He knew now that some devil's work had been going on, and he knew, too, that his coming was too late to hinder its completion.

"Look to him, fri'nds," he gasped, painfully, one hand pressed savagely over his madly thumping heart. "Make him tell—Dell!"

Grave Grant Pierson sprung to his side and gently lowered him to the floor, tearing his collar open and bathing his face with brandy.

Other men looked after Fergus Cameron, removing the gag, cutting his bonds, lifting him up, and giving him stimulants, of which he seemed in sore need. And seeing him shiver as he glanced around the room in which so strange a nuptial night had been passed, they lifted him in their strong arms and carried him downstairs and out beneath the gray arch of heaven.

Others bore the old man out into the cool morning air, where the more tardy wedding guests were using cold water as the handiest, surest means of bringing the drugged cowboys back to consciousness.

"Whar is she—whar's my little gal?" gasped Dement, struggling clear of his assistants and staggering up to Cameron, as he might have faced a bitter enemy.

So savage, so wild were his look and actions, that his arms were quickly caught and held powerless. But Fergus Cameron did not shrink away from the anguished father.

"Gone—stolen away by that demon, Prince Lucifer!" he muttered, his voice low and shaken, his face pale as that of a corpse.

"Stole away! An' you livin' to tell me that?"

"Help me take him away!" muttered Pierson, struggling with the crazed father. "There'll be murder, or he'll go mad."

But John Dement suddenly grew calm, and even laughed, though it was a sound that chilled the blood of all who heard it.

"They ain't no need, fri'nds," he said, his voice low and steady, though the great veins that stood out on his temples told how great an effort of will that required. "I hain't no time to go crazy jest yit. Thar's my little gal to look after, sence he—"

He cut the sentence short, turning partly away from Cameron, as though he feared his mad indignation would get the better of him, despite his marvelous self-restraint.

"Say it, John Dement—since I was powerless to hold what my great love had won!" impulsively uttered Cameron, his blue eyes aglow.

"You're livin', but she's gone!" doggedly muttered the rancher. "All the devils in hell couldn't 'a' tore her from my arms, while a breath o' life big enough to stir a feather was in my karkidge! An' ef you loved her as much as you try to make out, how comes it that you're here 'live and unburt, while she is gone?"

"We're losing time which might be better spent in hunting for some sign to show which way the devils went!" impatiently cried Fred Marble, adding sharply: "Scatter out, mates, and try to strike off the trail of the Imps!"

It was a timely diversion, and with but few exceptions the men struck out in a spreading,

diverging line, to search for "sign" beyond the immediate vicinity of the ranch, where their own hurrying to and fro had completely obliterated any telltale marks which the bold kidnappers might have left behind them.

To the few who remained, Fergus Cameron briefly, clearly told what he could of that black night's work. And as he listened, even John Dement began to feel that, after all, the young rancher had not been to blame for the loss of his fair bride.

Grant Pierson was one of those who remained, keeping a watch over the choleric rancher lest his insane grief and fury overcome his reason again; but as the husband told his story, and Dement grew calmer and more reasonable, the keen eyes of the second officer of the League went roving restlessly about them, to pause and glitter brightly as they were passing the single tree that stood near the ranch. On the brown trunk was a white patch which nature certainly never deposited there, and with an intuition of the truth, Pierson sprung forward and confirmed his suspicion.

Pinned to the trunk of the tree was a square of paper, on which words were written. Through its center was driven a slender-bladed dirk with silver handle and a cross haft.

His movements were not noticed by the rest of the little band, for just as he started for the tree Fergus Cameron uttered a low ejaculation, pointing out over the plain to the south, where the rosy light of the coming sun revealed a number of horsemen strung out in a line, one behind another, but all plainly heading for the ranch.

The foremost man bestrode a horse which shone almost like gold in the morning light. There was but one such yellow horse owned for many a mile around, and hence it was not difficult to name the rider.

"It's Radford, with his boys!" exclaimed one of the men. "He saw the light, I reckon, same as we did, and took saddle to investigate."

No one caught the black frown that swept over the pale face of the bereaved husband as he, too, recognized the horse and rider. Only for a moment did it last, then Fergus Cameron made no further sign.

"Look!" added the same speaker as the horseman suddenly drew rein and came to a halt. "Oscar ain't no fool! He's sighted us, but he ain't dead sure we're on the square. He sees the ranch is all right, so theron ain't no great rush in getting here. He'll wait for his boys, and come down with them at his back, ready for business if there's any hot work to be done. I tell you, he's no slouch!"

Something like the ghost of a smile passed across the lips of Fergus Cameron as he listened to this praise, but he said nothing. And with the rest he quietly awaited the coming of his defeated rival with half a dozen stout cowboys at his back.

All this time Grant Pierson was silent. After a swift glance assured him that neither John Dement nor Fergus Cameron noticed his impetuous action, he plucked the cross-hilted dirk from the tree, slipping it into his bosom, and hiding the square of paper from casual note.

He saw that the men were busy watching the coming of Oscar Radford, and stepped briskly away until he was hidden from their sight around one corner of the house. Then he glanced at the paper and saw that it was signed "Prince Lucifer!"

Pale, his eyes aglow, plainly showing that he suspected something had gone amiss, Oscar Radford dashed up, leaping from the saddle almost without drawing rein, alighting on his feet before John Dement, to whom he spoke hastily:

"Something has happened—what is it? No harm to—to her?"

"Run off—stole off by that red devil!" grated the rancher, an almost despairing look in his bloodshot eyes.

"And you standing here as though rooted fast, without making even an effort to save her?" hotly cried the young man, his black eyes filled with a glow that seemed almost scorching. "Circle off, boys, and look for the trail! A hundred dollars to the one who finds the first sign!"

As he uttered these words, he leaped upon the back of the yellow steed and dashed straight out over the level ground for a full quarter mile, then bent low in the saddle as he paced slowly along in a circle that would eventually surround the New Ranch. And at varying distances between and beyond, the cowboys imitated his movements.

"He's business, clear up!" muttered the same rancher who had before commended the long-headed young man.

Fergus Cameron turned to him with some abruptness, asking:

"At what hour, about, did Radford leave the house, last night?"

"Right after the ceremony," was the prompt response, though with evident surprise at the question. "It was enough that he came at all, one would think! I, for one, didn't look for him there!" he bluntly added, making no effort to conceal his partisanship.

"I understand you, sir," coldly retorted Cameron; adding, after a barely perceptible pause:

"And you will understand me better ere long."

"I understand that Oscar Radford is hunting for the trail of the rascals who kidnapped your wife, while you are standing here idle!" the rancher muttered in guarded tones, but plain enough for the ear which they were intended to catch.

"Don't bet any wealth that he'll be the first to show the right trail, my dear sir," coolly retorted Cameron, a curious smile flitting across his pale face as he turned away, to stop abruptly as he saw the tall form of Grant Pierson hastening toward the spot, one hand waving excitedly in the air, emphasizing the words he called out:

"Stop the search! Call in the boys, at least until you read what is on this bit of paper, Dement!"

"What is it? Whar'd you git it?" demanded Dement, springing forward and catching the paper, though his hands trembled so violently that he could hardly distinguish one word from another.

"On the tree, yonder, stuck fast with this," hurriedly explained Pierson, exhibiting the dirk. "I wouldn't call attention to it until I made sure it contained no worse news than—"

"Read it, you!" muttered Dement, thrusting the paper back into the hands from whence he had torn it. "I cain't see—my eyes is full o' dust, I reckon. Read it—durn ye, man! read it out, cain't ye!"

Grant Pierson quickly complied. It was directed to John Dement, and then followed the words:

"You, as head of the Law and Order League, advocated extreme measures, saying that the surest method of overthrowing the devil was to fight him with fire. As you see, the devil, as represented on earth by the undersigned and his Imps, has taken a leaf from your own book. The red cock crowed from the ridgepole of the New Ranch, and you have obeyed its lurid summons!

"Look in the embers for the bones of your fellow bloodhound, Fergus Cameron! But look not for the charming bride of an hour, without receiving my permission, unless you wish her death!

"To me, she is worth her weight in pure gold. If she is worth as much to you, she shall be restored, safe and sound, on receipt of the yellow metal or its equivalent. I will send an envoy to receive your answer, and agree upon terms. Until then, I warn you to make no effort to discover either her or those who bore her away. If you do—if you take even one step in that direction before the question of ransom or not ransom is settled—I swear by all man holds evil! *she die's!*

"You have this night been shown what I can do, when I try. You know now what I will do, if you drive me to it. A word to the wise is said to be quite enough, but—as you hardly come under this head, I have thought best to speak at more length.

"PRINCE LUCIFER."

Thus the warning was couched.

"He's just demon enough to do all he threatens, too!" added Grant Pierson as he finished reading the note. "I think you'd better call in the boys, and weigh the matter thoroughly, before even trying to strike the trail."

"I think the trail is already struck, Mr. Pierson," quietly asserted Cameron, but still making signals that were promptly answered by the scattered band of trail-hunters.

"Ef ve know anythin' fer sartain, lad, spit it out!" cried Dement.

"In a moment, father," was the quiet response, with a curious fire filling the blue eyes. "Mr. Radford looks as though he had something of importance to say," as that personage rode up and alighted.

"I've found several fresh trails, heading away from the ranch, Mr. Dement, and no doubt they belong to the gang that—"

"I can point out a still fresher one, Oscar Radford!" sharply uttered Cameron, stepping forward with drawn pistol. "Hands up, you devil! You are Prince Lucifer, and I—"

A hard fist cut the sentence short, and stricken full in the neck, Fergus Cameron was hurled endlong, half a dozen feet away!

CHAPTER X.

A FAIR PROSPECT FOR A PRETTY PIC-NIC.

So unexpected was this charge, so swiftly came the blow that sent Fergus Cameron headlong to mother earth, that all was over before any of those standing nearest could lift a finger to aid or interfere.

But as the young Scotchman struck the ground with the dull, lifeless sound of a corpse, there came an instant movement, a chorus of half-wondering, half-mad cries. Weapons were drawn, and for an instant it looked like a free fight, each man on his own hook, none of whom exactly understood what the row was about.

Oscar Radford, his face white and hard-set, sprung back a pace or two, one hand uplifted in warning, the other flashing forth a revolver as he cried sharply:

"Hold hard, all of you! Don't try to crowd me without sense or reason, or I'll not be the only one to suffer!"

Not the least surprised of them all, John Dement stared first at the fallen form, then at the defiant rancher, his shaggy brows beginning to contract, his black eyes to fill with a dangerous glow.

"What was it he said? What you keel him over fer, Radford?" he demanded, harshly.

"Because he lied—lied most foully!" was the hot response.

"He said—what was it the lad said?" turning to those nearest him, with the look of a man whose wits are not yet entirely clear.

"That I was Prince Lucifer!" cried Radford, with a short, bitter laugh that told how little love there was lost between the rivals. "He said that I was that vile demon, and I knocked him down, just as I'd knock down an angel for the same foul insult!"

"He said that—he said you was the dirty imp as run off my little gal, my Dell?" slowly muttered Dement, brushing one hand across his brow as though he would clear away the mists.

"You heard him, gentlemen," a little more naturally added Radford, with a quick glance over the irresolute crowd, momently growing larger as the trail-hunters came in, attracted by the bustle. "Only that I felt he was hardly accountable for his words or actions, I'd have sent a bullet through his crazy brain, instead of using my fist. As it is, pick him up and cool him off, some of you. Let's see if he'll repeat his preposterous charge in cold blood!"

The truth seemed to work through the befogged brain of the old rancher by this time, and he sprung into life and action with all his wonted energy. His face flushed darkly as he strode close up to Oscar Radford, staring him keenly in the face, his voice hard and menacing:

"I know, now! I'm soberin' up, I reckon. Anyway, young man, I know what I'm sayin' to you, an' you don't want to fergit it!

"Ef you cain't clär your skirts o' what Cameron says, salt won't save ye, fer it's with me you've got to deal, fu'st of all! Ef you've bin playin' double an' tryin' to git even by misdealin' ag'in' my Dell, ef you hed the lives of a thousan' cats all b'il'd down to one, an' that one all yours, it wouldn't begin to last out my vengeance!"

Oscar Radford smiled coldly, his armed hand passing behind his back in deference to those gray hairs, and his tones calmer as he said:

"I can make allowances for you, Mr. Dement. Naturally your sympathies are all with your son-in-law, but still I believe you are too much of a man to condemn even one whom you hate without giving him a chance to defend himself."

"You didn't give him any!" muttered one of the ranchers.

"He pulled a gun on me and I knocked him down with my fist. What more of a chance can you ask?" sharply cried Radford, his black eyes glowing, his revolver once more in sight and readiness.

"I'll riddle the man that burns powder afore I kin git to the bottom o' this muddle!" thundered John Dement, flashing a wicked look around him. "You, boy, hev got to stop an' face the music. You, gents, watch him while I look to Cameron. Ef he tries to run, fetch him up with a round turn, or—"

"Spare your insults, Mr. Dement," coldly interposed Radford, a spot of scarlet coming into his cheeks, his black eyes on fire. "I can't answer you as I answered that lying cur—worse luck!"

"There's plenty of younger men ready to take his place and assume every responsibility," promptly retorted Fred Marble, stepping forward. "For lack of a better substitute, suppose you begin with me?"

But John Dement would not have it so. His heavy grip fell upon the hot-tempered rancher's shoulders, and his giant strength forced him back to the spot where Fergus Cameron still lay, though now giving signs of returning consciousness.

"He's my meat, or else he goes clär, I tell you, boy!" sternly cried the old rancher. "Ef he's hed a finger in this mischief, I'll butcher him by inches but what I git even fer all! But ef he hain't, if it cain't be brung home to his door, then the man that hurts him hes got to settle me, too!"

Those words insured a temporary truce, although the trouble was one that could hardly be settled without bloodshed. Already sides were being chosen, already the crowd was separating, and though the division was very unequal, there were enough stout, hardy partisans who favored the accused to make the victory anything but a walk-over.

Naturally enough, all of the cowboys who had come with him, took sides with Radford, and there were a few among the ranchers who could not forget how strangely, how suddenly Fergus Cameron had changed places with his rival. That was not yet explained, and they naturally felt that concealment in such a matter implied trickery on the other side. They were with the accused, at least until Fergus Cameron could bring proof of his charge.

And Melancholy Mike who had been among the foremost in reaching the New Ranch, and with the leaders in searching for the trail of the kidnappers, made no bones about going over to the enemy.

"I wouldn't b'lieve it ef a angel was to come right down from glory to kiss the book!" he blurted out as he moved over and ranged himself in opposition to his associates. "An'

they ain't no angel 'bout his clo'es—not any.' with a defiant pugnacious nod of his head toward the slowly reviving rancher.

A faint smile flitted across the face of the accused, as he cast a quick glance over the little squad who seemed inclined to stand by him even in the face of such a black charge. But it lasted only a moment. A grave expression took its place, and he spoke rapidly:

"I owe you all one for this confidence, friends, but for my sake keep cool and hold your hands. We haven't time to waste in fighting among ourselves—our lives are not our own as long as Miss Della is in trouble."

He stopped short, choked by that old, familiar name, it seemed. He used it without thought of the change, one would say, until it passed his lips; and then he would not correct himself.

Fergus Cameron was sitting up, pale as a corpse, save where the swelling and rapidly discolored lump on his neck was growing, telling what a terrible blow the lithe rancher had dealt him. And without waiting to see how his advice was received, Oscar Radford impulsively stepped forward and faced the Scotchman, speaking rapidly, his voice steady and subdued, thanks to his great powers of self-control.

"Cameron, I won't say that I'm sorry for the blow I dealt you, for that would be a lie. You insulted me, and were ready to back it up with your gun. I had to knock you down or kill you, and I didn't want your blood on my hands if I could help it."

With an effort Fergus Cameron rose to his feet, still unsteady, still feeling the effects of that marvelous stroke, but with the ghost of a smile upon his ghastly pale face. He made no attempt to draw a weapon, or to assault his rival in any manner.

John Dement was standing close to his shoulder, ready to interfere at once in such a case, but his sternly squared jaws relaxed a little as he heard Cameron utter so calmly:

"This is more than a mere row between two men, Oscar Radford, and I neither expect nor will I receive an apology."

"Nor am I offering one," quickly retorted Radford, with a frown. "I simply wish to remind you that all of us owe a sacred duty to Miss—to John Dement's daughter," correcting himself with a slight stammer, but still refusing to give Della the name which his rival had bestowed upon her. "We have no right to quarrel while her life and liberty are in jeopardy. Until she is rescued, our lives are not our own to dispose of other than in her service, and—"

"You are speaking of my wife?" coldly interrupted Cameron.

"And your life is sacred to me, because she loves you," added Oscar Radford, ignoring the break, though his face suddenly flushed with an angry light that faded away just as quickly.

"You are extremely considerate!" sneered Cameron, an ugly light leaping into his blue eyes. "If you had only felt a little of this superfluous consideration last night when you and your cu-throat."

"And if you have a spark of manhood about you, Fergus Cameron, you will pick your words a little more carefully!" sharply interposed the other, his voice hard and unnatural. "Only a cowardly cur would be low-minded enough to deal such a foul blow at an adversary who voluntarily disarms himself!"

"What I say I stand ready to prove," was the cold retort.

"Then you have the power to prove a lie as false as hell itself!"

"Hot words will not save you, Oscar Radford," and Cameron seemed to grow cooler, more self-contained, as his defeated rival in love waxed hot and fierce. "You've played your last card. You have run your head through a noose, and shouldn't complain if it chokes you."

There came a growing murmur from those who were standing by and watching the wordy dispute. Oscar Radford cast a swift glance around him, as though calculating the chances for and against him.

Be this as it may, Fergus Cameron was quick to see and prompt to turn the action to his own advantage.

"That won't save you, even if you make the attempt," he said with a short, hard laugh. "You are surrounded by honest men, not by your pet Imps, and a break-away—"

"Don't overstep the line, Fergus Cameron!" interrupted Radford, his voice growing hard and steady once more. "You crossed it once, and I had to knock you back. Don't make me repeat the action, or you may not come off near so easily."

"I reckon you boys hev spit-spat back an' fo'th enough fer one spell," bluntly interposed John Dement, striding between the twain. "It may be fun fer you, but it's wastin' time fer the rest o' us. Ef you've got anythin' to show that'll back up your words, lad," turning to Fergus Cameron, "spit it right out, an' in a mighty hurry, too."

"I am ready to take oath that Oscar Radford, disguised as Prince Lucifer, and calling himself by that title, came to yonder house last night, and taking me by surprise—jumping me from behind—with the aid of a lot more of masked

devils, bound and left me as you saw. I swear that I recognized him in spite of his cunning disguise, by his shape and general build, and by his voice when he grew careless and forgot to disguise it as at first!" rapidly, yet calmly uttered Cameron.

There was a stir and an ugly muttering among the crowd as these positive words were pronounced. Weapons were handled feverishly, and though the division lines between the two parties remained the same, it needed only a glance to see that already a few of the ranchers who at first had sympathized with Radford, were beginning to waver.

"Them's mighty plain words, Radford!" growled Dement, his black eyes filling with a deadly fire as they stared into the pale face of the accused. "What you got to say fer yourself?"

"That Cameron is ready to swear to a lie, either mistakenly, or, as I am inclined to believe, with full knowledge that it is false. He says he stands ready to prove his charges. As yet he has only given you his unsupported word, while I stand ready to prove by ten good and true men that I could not possibly have been at this ranch at the hour he mentions," was the composed response.

"As for you," abruptly turning upon his accuser, shaking a forefinger menacingly before his face as he spoke, "I have told you your life is sacred from my anger until after John Dement's daughter is set free from the infernal power into which you permitted her to fall, and that without receiving a single mark or scratch to prove your manhood!"

"After that—I'll call you to a strict account for the words you are cur enough to utter while you know my hands are bound! And unless you prove them every one beyond the shadow of a doubt, I'll disgrace you in the eyes of every honest man in the whole Pan-handle!"

"In less bombastic words, you want to sneak off without investigation just now!" sharply retorted Cameron, showing his teeth fiercely, yet making no move to touch a weapon or strike a blow.

"Have you anything more positive than suspicion to advance, Mr. Cameron?" gravely asked Grant Pierson.

"I swear he's the man!"

"And he just as positively declares that he is not the rascal. In support of his declaration he points to his men, while—"

"And so would the Prince Lucifer with being which I charge him!"

"While your assertion is as yet unbacked," gravely added Pierson.

"Mebbe I kin say somethin' to help git at the bottom of it, boss!"

The speaker was none other than Cinnamon Green, the chief of the cowboy body-guard. He staggered as he came forward, his face was flushed and swollen, and there was a strong odor of bad whisky plentifully diffused from his person.

"You—lurn you fer a dirty cur!" grated John Dement, striding forward and felling the burly cowboy to the earth with a stroke of his huge fist, sending the blood flying in a crimson spray, fairly flattening the fellow's nose to a level with his cheeks. "Did I pay ye to git dead drunk, an' let the cussed wolves run off my one pore little lamb?"

"He was drugged—that scarlet devil boasted of it while he had us captive!" hastily cried Cameron, but not quickly enough to save his henchman from punishment.

"With bad whisky. Cain't I see it stickin' out all over the durned critter?" growled the choleric rancher.

Slowly Cinnamon Green regained his feet, brushing the blood from his face and spitting out a number of loosened teeth, all the while gazing intently into the face of John Dement. Then he spoke slowly, indistinctly:

"It was a foul blow, boss, in more ways than one. I wasn't lookin' fer none sech, nor sayin' aught that deserved it. But I won't lay it up ag'in' ye like I might of I didn't see you're nigh gone crazy over what's happened."

"An' what I paid you to guard ag'inst, you rum-sucker."

"An' as a proof that I don't hold no grudge, I'll say what I set out to say afore you hit me foul. It was the boss, thar, that give us the licker, an'—"

"You ain't 'cisin' him of druggin' you?" ejaculated Dement.

"I ain't no sech fool," with a half-grin. "I don't say it was doctered, though it tuck mighty little to keel us all over. I'm only sayin' what I kin take oath to: an' that is I saw a devil-like lookin' critter stoopin' over me; that as he did it, the skin o' his face fell off, an' I see another face underneath it!"

"Whose face was it?" cried Dement, quickly.

Cinnamon Green deliberately pointed direct at Oscar Radford.

"That's the face I see, an' I'm takin' oath to it right now!"

A short, contemptuous laugh broke from the lips of the doubly accused, as all eyes followed the cowboy's finger.

"You were drunk and drugged then, by your own admission. You are drunk now, as any

and all can see. Only as big an idiot as you are rascal, would give your oath a second thought."

Without a second glance toward Green, Radford turned to John Dement, who was frowning darkly as though more than half convinced that the chief plotter was before him and within easy reach of his hand.

"Mr. Dement, I will condescend to defend myself to you. I left your house immediately after the ceremony, or when the search for the assassin who shot at you was abandoned, I should say, and rode directly home. All of you know my horse has a track not easily confounded with another. If necessary, you can follow my trail to my ranch. I can prove by my men that I reached there a little before midnight—that I went to bed and was found there when one of them roused me with word of a red light in this direction; that I at once took horse and rode at hot speed to this place—to be falsely accused, as you have heard!"

"If your men are willing to swear to this, then they must be part of the gang that aided you in your infernal work!" impetuously cried Cameron, his blue eyes aglow with fierce passion.

"You shall answer for that, when I call on you to settle for the rest of your insults, Mr. Cameron," coldly uttered Radford.

"It must be now or never, then!" was the retort, with plainly growing anger. "I charge you with being Prince Lucifer, and call on all honest men within sound of my voice to close in and take you—alive! If it was only your death, I'd settle that!"

A glittering weapon covered him, and Radford cried sternly:

"Hands empty, Fergus Cameron, unless you're in love with death! Try to touch a gun, and down you go for good and all!"

As he uttered these words Oscar Radford backed away toward his little knot of men whose revolvers and repeaters were ready for use if nothing milder could save their master.

During this wordy warfare Melancholy Mike had not been idle. Indeed, he had been wonderfully busy, principally among the cowboys who were, like himself, employed by John Dement.

Mike was an ardent partisan of Radford's as against Cameron, probably because Sally Stokes strongly favored the dark lover and never grew weary of bewailing the awful mistake her fair young mistress was making in wedding the wrong man. And now he worked with a will, his tongue busy and his muttered words carrying conviction with them.

At this crisis, Melancholy Mike ran between the rivals, his arms swinging about wildly, his honest blue eyes full of earnest persuasion, his tongue rattling off the words:

"I'll kill the fu'st critter as pulls trigger. We hain't got no right fer to fight 'mongst ourselves while the little angel is in trouble an' callin' on us fer to round up her enemies an' fetch her back to the home corral! I call on every white son-of-a-gun here to help me keep the peace, even ef we hev to fight fer it!"

A chorus of shouts followed this announcement, and a number of men on foot and on horseback pressed in between the two parties, effectually dividing them for the moment.

"It's one man's word ag'inst another's, an' nobody but a durned, chuckle-headed fool'd even begin to think Oscar Radford would play sech a dirty trick as this!" indignantly cried Melancholy Mike, forgetting his position as mediator in his honest indignation at the foul slur cast upon his favorite—or Sally's favorite.

There was a cold but resolute smile upon the pale face of the accused as he pushed Melancholy Mike aside to once more confront his enemies. His hands were empty, and he did not even glance toward Fergus Cameron, addressing John Dement instead:

"I am not blaming you, sir, for it is only natural, perhaps, that you should prefer your son-in-law's word to mine. I only say that the day will come, soon or late, when you will be eager to ask my pardon for suspecting me of such a crime. So much for that."

"You know I am not rich, but every dollar I can raise, every horn and hoof and acre of mine is at your disposal, if Miss Della was captured for the purpose of exacting a ransom, as I suppose—"

"Say as you know!" grated Cameron, on whose arm John Dement had a stern and restraining grip.

"—must be the case," completing the sentence as though he had not heard the interruption. "If you will permit, I'll not only do this much but will serve under your orders as a private until Prince Lucifer and his Imps are swept from the face of the earth."

"As they shall be!" fiercely grated Cameron, his face turning almost livid with intense hatred and rage. "And when the mask is torn from over the face of Prince Lucifer, the whole world will know you as I know you, Oscar Radford!"

"And when that work is done—as it shall be, whether I work with or independent of you, Mr. Dement—when your daughter is rescued from those demons—if she says I am Prince Lucifer, or that I had any part in this foul outrage—I'll fit the noose about my neck with

my own hands, and beg of you to hang me like a dog!"

There was an earnestness in these words that seemed to check even the hot tongue of Cameron. John Dement looked sorely puzzled, but said:

"I don't want to think it of you, lad. But I can't make it come cl'ar that he'd take a flat lie in his mouth like that, nuther."

"That settles it, then," with a haughty inclination of his head. "You shall have the papers and money, as I said. You can use them as you see fit, to return as a loan if I am proved true, to distribute among those whom Prince Lucifer has robbed, if I am shown to be the black-hearted devil you half-believe, just now."

Without a word, without a hand being lifted to stay him, Oscar Radford mounted and rode away at top speed, with his men following after.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CHIEF OF THE IMPS AT HOME.

"LONG ere this you are a widow!"

Della Cameron stared at the steadily widening, lifting light to which Prince Lucifer called her attention. She did not comprehend its full meaning at first, even with those devilishly malignant words ringing in her ears. As yet she had not fully recovered from that mercifully benumbing swoon.

Prince Lucifer was keenly watching the effects of his cruel speech, and there was light sufficient to show how little he relished the apparent calmness with which she received it. His dark eyes seemed to fill with fire, and there was an angry malice in his voice as he waved one gloved hand toward the ruddy beacon.

"It is seldom my gentle Imps fail when I set them to work, and you can see for yourself that they have not made a botch of this congenial task! In yonder red light the New Ranch vanishes from the face of the earth, and with it goes the—shall we say spirit?—of Fergus Cameron!

"He thought to make capital out of my name and reputation, without much trouble and less risk. He swore he would run me down and torture me until I suffered a thousand deaths, demon though I might be. Now—the bridal couch has turned to his funeral pyre! The bride whose embraces he feels, whose hot kisses are not satisfied with his lips alone, is death!"

"And you, fair Della, are a widow before you could realize that you were a wife. You are free to repent the hasty step that, more than any one thing, has brought all this trouble and vexation upon your head. You can—Come!" with an abrupt change of manner and tone, as though in his excitement he had permitted himself to say too much or to speak too clearly, wrenching their horses' heads around, and once more pressing rapidly on to the northwest.

There was little of that wild ride which Della Cameron could recall with distinctness, after it came to an end, and her poor brain grew clearer. She could only tell that it lasted long, that they must have spent hours in the saddle.

She was still like one only partially conscious of what was taking place about her. Body and brain seemed curiously benumbed, without entirely disabling either.

She understood the meaning of the words spoken by Prince Lucifer while he pointed out that red glow to the southeast. She knew that the glow arose from the New Ranch, and she felt that Fergus Cameron was dead, cruelly burned to death by the orders of this malicious, this merciless demon in scarlet and black.

Yet—and she even felt herself vaguely marvelling that such should be the case—she felt only a dim, phantom-like sympathy and regret for the man whose name she bore. It was a frightful fate, but then—was it much worse than a life of discontent? Much worse than long years passed with a loveless wife?

Then she seemed to waken with a start to life and clearness of brain. It was when Prince Lucifer paused again and bound a silken handkerchief tightly over her eyes, saying:

"We are nearing home, fair one with the jetty curls, and though I hardly think your tongue would wittingly injure the friend who set you free from the bonds that began to gall, even before they could be fairly tied, there's nothing so sure as certainty. What you don't know you can't tell, and lies are barred out!"

It was a curious bit of experience, taken from first to last. One moment in a dream, the next cool, clear-witted, brave.

Della knew that she was led on for perhaps another mile, then the abrupt change of sound told her they were passing beneath a solid arch of some sort. There was a peculiar echo as the hoofs struck the earth that could be produced by nothing else. It might be into a cavern, but the air was the same, warm and dry. She believed she could still feel the sun's rays.

There was a scent of cookery also, and this told her they were not in a wholly desolate or deserted region.

"Welcome home, lady-bird!" cried Prince Lucifer, drawing rein and leaping to the ground. "This is your cage for a time. How long depends wholly on the amiable John Dement and his grip on his gold!"

Della felt her bonds being loosened, and a wild impulse seized on her to make an effort to escape; only to die out as rapidly. Only the bonds that secured her to the saddle were cast off then. Strong arms closed about her waist, and she was borne rapidly from the spot.

She knew that she was carried into a building of some sort, and placed in a chair. She felt hands releasing her limbs, and then came a brief pause, after which Prince Lucifer removed the bandage from her eyes.

"Once more, my dear, I bid you welcome!" he uttered, with an exaggerated bow, as he drew back a pace or two, waving his gloved hand toward a little table on which rested food, drink and napkins. "As you see, your visit was not wholly unexpected, although the warning was too short for much preparation. That will be remedied without delay, however, and I know you are too kind to find fault where none is meant.

"You must be hungry and tired. Here is food and yonder is a bed. Pray try and make yourself at home, or my poor heart will bleed tears of sorrow and mortification!"

With another bow, with a low, mocking laugh, Prince Lucifer backed from the presence of his captive, passing through a door which clanged heavily behind him. And Della heard the rattle of chains and the falling of bars on the further side.

A swift glance around her caused her to spring to her feet. They were tingling and prickling with the rush of blood, caused by the removal of the cords that had confined them for so long, but she managed to reach the window which had caused her sudden start. Only to utter a low cry of disappointment.

Instead of giving her a view of the surrounding country, it opened on an inner court, a hollow square, precisely similar to that which she was tolerably familiar with at Rob Roy Ranch!

For one instant she believed that this was Rob Roy Ranch, but the idea was too intensely absurd to be entertained longer. That would be the last place in all the world to which the murderer of Fergus Cameron would carry her!

Beyond, she could see several long, narrow windows, each one without glazing and crossed with iron bars, just as was the one through which she was now gazing. She could see that the walls were of adobe, rudely whitewashed. Above the flat roof, only the blue sky; nothing more!

Slowly she turned and glanced around her. The little table with food. Several chairs. A low bed in one corner. The window and door. Several pictures on the whitewashed walls, mostly treating of religious subjects, from a Catholic point of view, in glaring red and blue and gold.

"Just such a room as—"

Della checked herself, with an impatient shake of the head. Only for the peculiar ornaments on the wall, this might pass readily for a room which Fergus Cameron once showed her in Rob Roy Ranch, as that destined for his wife, should fortune ever prove so kind to him.

Della seated herself in the cushioned easy-chair, forcing herself to bring all that had happened in detail before her mind's eye. To keep her wits from wandering, she closed her eyes, covering them tightly with her hands.

Back to the first coming of the invited guests. Then on, step by step, through the weary waiting for the tardy bridegroom, to his coming in such wretched plight. She forced herself to pass in review the account he gave of their encounter with Prince Lucifer. She dwelt on his description of the masked demon, and shivered anew as she saw how accurately it agreed with what she had afterward seen—how closely it corresponded with that haunting echo when Prince Lucifer grew warm with his taunts and threatenings that night!

And so, on through all that eventful night, Della forced herself to recall and consider each happening, each point which could by any possibility solve the mystery of Prince Lucifer, or throw any light on his actual reasons for making such bitter war on her and hers.

And then—her overtired powers began to yield. From closely weighing facts, she floated off to fancies. And then lay sleeping soundly, peacefully, like a little child wearied with play.

When consciousness returned, it was suddenly as though some sharp sound had broken her slumbers. She started half erect, only to sink back again with a low exclamation.

Before her, with an elbow resting on the little table, and one hand daintily holding a cigarette, Prince Lucifer was seated, his black eyes fixed upon her with a half-laughing light in their depths.

"I beg of you not to rise on my account, Mrs. Cameron," he said, his tones musical if slightly drawling, and graciously waving his unoccupied hand. "This is Liberty Hall, and old friends like you and I surely need not stand on ceremony with each other?"

All dumbness, all weakness, all trepidation had vanished, and the girl-wife showed a coolness fully equal to that displayed by her captor as she replied:

"You certainly practice what you preach—thus far, at least! Of course you have business which brings you here? For even such an impudent varlet as Prince Lucifer would hardly dare intrude on the rest of a lady guest, without some shade of an excuse."

One little hand rising to conceal a yawn, real or admirably counterfeited, Della Cameron leaned back in her chair, gazing with curling lip and slightly arched brows upon the chief of the Night-Imps.

In the interval he had changed his garb. The hideous scarlet mask had been discarded for one of plain black silk, fringed at the lower edge, thus hiding chin and lips without hindering the manipulation of a cigarette.

The tight fitting jersey was gone, and a loose blouse or jacket took its place. White trowsers and slippers completed the outward dress, though a velvet smoking-cap rested on his head.

Through the holes in his mask, the black eyes glittered at this unexpectedly cool speech, but Prince Lucifer was hardly one to be long taken aback or at a loss for a word.

"A mere trifle," with a light wave of his gloved hand. "Simply to ask you which you prefer: to eat after a Christian fashion, or be crammed as our Christian forefathers used to cram their Thanksgiving turkey.

He slightly nodded his head toward the untouched viands on the table at his elbow, adding:

"Of course a bride is not expected to have much of an appetite for substantials, while the honeymoon is so awkwardly new, but as you are very precious in my eyes—worth your weight in gold, to bring it down to a fine point—I must insist on your keeping up to your standard. Starvation is all well enough, no doubt, in some cases, but it will not answer my views in this. Once more—will you eat?"

"Why not, since I am really hungry?" retorted Della, rising and moving her chair to the opposite side of the table from that on which Prince Lucifer sat.

This prompt response plainly took the chief of the Night-Imps by surprise, and he showed that fact so clearly that a low, mocking laugh parted the red lips of the girl-wife.

"Never make an offer which you are not quite ready to have accepted, my dear sir," she said, laughingly, drawing food nearer and pouring out a glass of wine before her captor could forestall her. "Your dismay makes me all the more hungry, as it seemed to indicate a terribly depleted larder! Why don't you go steal some more beeswax?"

"Because your delicious charms overpower my dread of starvation," the prince laughed, turning around and pressing the viands upon her. "Because I draw renewed life and strength by simply breathing the same air with you, Mrs. Cameron!"

"Another failure, Sir Satan," was the cool retort. "Not even your labored compliments can choke me off—I am so terribly hungry!"

Even Prince Lucifer was not wholly proof against ridicule, and there was a vicious glitter in the dark eyes as he retorted:

"You are preciously cool for one whose husband has hardly yet grown cold in death!"

A soft, low laugh parted the red lips, and Della gazed up at the speaker with a peculiarly annoying coolness.

"Does your whole stock in trade consist of that worn out threat? Of course, if you will be left wholly unarmed without it, I'll have mercy, and pretend to be frightfully alarmed, but—"

"There is no pretense about it, as you shall discover, my lady!" exclaimed Prince Lucifer, dropping all assumed politeness, allowing his evil passions full sway. "Fergus Cameron was slowly roasting to death in that fire, as I declared to you when I pointed it out! Long before the people at your father's ranch could take the alarm and reach the scene, his body was turned to ashes and his bones to powder!"

"That you declare as much, is proof sufficient of its utter falseness," quietly retorted Della, eating as though she was never more hungry in all her life. "But I do not need that evidence. Since you were kind enough to leave me to myself, a while ago, I've thought the whole matter over."

"With what result, may I ask?" sneeringly uttered Prince Lucifer.

"I would tell you even if the query was not made, if only to show you what folly you are guilty of in persisting in such a miserable farce," was the response, in the same cool, composed tones.

"I am listening, Mrs. Cameron."

"Cultivate your patience, my dear devil. I never could do two things at once, and just now I prefer eating to talking."

Prince Lucifer flung aside the stump of his cigarette, and lit a fresh one, but he said nothing in words. Still, Della smiled placidly, for she could see that her unexpected coolness was strongly annoyng her captor. It was a course she had entered upon without thought or consideration, but since it appeared to work so well,

she was resolved to stick to it as long as possible.

She ate deliberately, unfeignedly enjoying the food. She was very hungry, after fasting so long; and the long, steady thinking to which she had forced herself before sleep overpowered her, had set her mind greatly more at ease than may, at first glance, seem reasonable.

In equal silence Prince Lucifer waited, and though Della vailed her glances, she could see by the more tranquil manner in which he smoked, that he was gradually regaining control of his passions. A faint smile flitted across her face, but she made no remark until her hunger was wholly appeased. Then she spoke abruptly.

"Why am I so certain that you speak falsely? Because you have kidnapped me for the purpose of extorting a heavy ransom from my father. Because you are no fool, however wicked you may be."

"The compliment takes the edge off of the qualifer, Mrs. Cameron," bowed Prince Lucifer, mockingly. "Any one can be a fool, but it takes at least a touch of genius to be wicked. Pardon me; you were saying?"

"That dearly as my father loves me, his only child," with just a trace of unsteadiness in her tones, but which instantly vanished as she resumed, "he would never come to terms with a demon who would commit such an atrocious deed. You know him well enough to have foreseen this."

"I preferred to run that risk, rather than forego my revenge on the man who stole—who married you!" sharply cried Prince Lucifer, his eyes glowing, his voice harsh and vicious.

"If you had meant the death of my husband, you would never have left him alive," steadily continued Della. "You would have killed him when he lay helplessly at your mercy. You would not have run even the ghost of a chance for his escaping, if your hatred had been one tithe as intense as you try to make me believe."

Prince Lucifer laughed hardly.

"And by setting the fire, have brought the bloodhounds on my heels before I could make safe my retreat with my prize? Before I could cover my trail? Bah! I am not such an idiot!"

Della hesitated for a brief space, her eyes downcast. Then, gazing intently into those dark orbs, she demanded:

"Why do you hate Fergus Cameron so intensely? What has he ever done to you, more than any other member of the League which your bold thefts and raids caused to organize?"

"Do you really wish to know?" slowly asked Prince Lucifer.

"Of course, since I ask the question."

"Because he is not fit to be your husband!" was the swift reply, in a deep, earnest tone of voice. "Because he—bah!" with a short laugh and impatient flinging out of one gloved hand.

He poured out a glass of wine and drank it. Then, his tone and manner entirely changed, his earnestness gone, giving place to an insolent flippancy, he resumed:

"In one word, my angel, it was love that set the wheels turning! You were far too sweet a bride for that Scotchman. And so I determined to kill two birds with one stone; to avenge myself and Imps, and bear away a sweet morsel for which my lips had long hungered!"

Della leaned back in her chair, a peculiar light in her dark eyes. She did not seem offended by the words, nor frightened by his manner.

"And you thought to play the bold Lochinvar?"

"Why not?" a little tartly. "You might go further to fare worse!"

"There, at least, I fully agree with you!" was the unexpected reply.

"What?" sharply ejaculated Prince Lucifer.

"That if I must have a lover for a jailer, I greatly prefer you should be that one," laughed Della, with a mocking bow. "Of course I mean as long as my guardian must be chosen from outlaw ranks."

"Even with that qualification, the preference makes my heart fairly swell with joy!" declared Prince Lucifer, but with a tone that, despite himself, betrayed more surprise than ecstasy.

"Pray contain your delight for a moment, and tell me just what conditions you demand for my freedom?"

She smiled again as she saw how willingly Prince Lucifer accepted the change of subject and more than ever she felt that she was acting all for the best, that her first suspicion was a correct one.

"I left a note for John Dement, telling him that when he was ready to pay for your return at market rates, the trade would be effected. As for the amount, as near as I can come to it by guessing, I put the figure at six-and-thirty thousand dollars, more or less."

"You are less polite than I fancied you, Sir Devil!" pouted Della, with a little frown. "You underestimate my real worth, positively!"

"So much the worse for your father's pocket, then," laughed Prince Lucifer, once more seeming wholly at his ease. "But let me explain: We have but one rate for live stock such as you, dear girl. And that is pound for pound—

a pound of flesh for a pound of gold, both avoirdupois weight. You weigh say one hundred and twenty-five pounds. That is 2,000 ounces. We call an ounce of gold worth \$18. The result, in plain figures reaches the neat little sum of \$36,000. And when John Dement forks over that amount, you will be set at liberty, to go whither your own sweet will dictates!"

Della hesitated for a moment, gazing intently into those dark eyes as though trying to read in them the actual truth. Then she spoke in slow, steady tones:

"Swear to one thing, and I will tell you what my decision is."

"It is your father's decision which I want most," shortly.

"It amounts to the same thing," coldly. "If I send him a note saying that all is fair, and that I have received no injury beyond being held a captive, he will instantly pay you the sum you demand for my ransom. Without that assurance, he will insist on seeing me first, to assure himself that I have suffered no wrong."

"What is it you ask?" slowly demanded Prince Lucifer.

Della laughed softly, the peculiar light deepening in her eyes.

"Nothing from which you should shrink, providing your words of a few minutes ago have even the slightest foundation on truth. Simply that you swear to be my guard yourself!"

Prince Lucifer started, with a low ejaculation that was almost an oath. He gazed intently into that smiling face for a little, then said:

"I am not quite sure I understand you, Mrs. Cameron."

"Yet I spoke plainly enough. You are to be my jailer. You alone are to enter this room while I am kept captive. I am to see no other guard, to have no one intrude upon me save you!"

"And poor me?" cried Prince Lucifer, with a short, low laugh. "You surely forget the great temptation you are throwing in my path? You forget that I am a sinner—that I am Prince Lucifer, and therefore one who knows not what it is to fight against temptation!"

"I forget nothing," with sudden sharpness. "You may be the sinner you say, but instead of prince, your title should be princess!"

"What the foul fiend do you mean by that?" was the harsh demand.

"Simply that I know you are a woman!" quickly retorted Della, with emphasis, "and no more of a man than I am myself!"

CHAPTER XII.

MORE WINE, THE LESS WIT.

LEANING back in her chair as she deliberately uttered these words, Della Cameron closely watched their effect on her masked captor.

There was a start of surprise which was plainly genuine, and it was accompanied by a muttered curse in Spanish, the latter of which evidence apparently shocked Della far the most severely.

A low ejaculation broke as if involuntarily from her lips, and a strange mixture of doubt, wonder and conviction appeared in her face and widely opening eyes. She partly started from her chair, only to resume her seat with an enforced composure.

The mask turned toward her at the sound, and Della coolly spoke:

"Not only do I know you are a woman, but I am ready to lay a little wager with you that I can mention your name at the first trial!"

"My name?" echoed Prince Lucifer, still off his balance it seemed.

"Double or quits as to the ransom that I am correct!" persisted the captive, a little laugh accompanying the words.

True, she was none the less a captive, but for the moment she almost forgot that fact in her little triumph. This Prince Lucifer had tried to frighten her, had set out to carry off matters with such a high hand, that a victory was worth a little exultation.

There was no immediate reply. Prince Lucifer sat staring into her fair face, his dark eyes glowing vividly through the twin apertures in his silken mask. As if mechanically his gloved hands poured out another glass of wine and lifted it beneath the heavy fringe that fell below his lips. Not once, but thrice was this action repeated, without a word being spoken on either side.

Della met that steady gaze unflinchingly, faintly smiling, the ghost of a sneer curving her red lips. She felt that she was master of the situation, just then, and could afford to wait.

"My name?" re-echoed the mask, dropping the wine-glass and rising erect. "What can you know of my name, other than that of Prince Lucifer? I have no other for you!"

"Yet you decline to accept the wager I propose! Double or quits that I can call you by name—and that name will not be Prince Lucifer, nor any other masculine appellation!"

Prince Lucifer laughed shortly, but it was plainly forced. And his notes were a trifle unsteady, as he muttered:

"I have many names—one for every day in the year almost! But as to any of them being feminine—"

"You still try to keep up the farce, Mercedes del Cavillo?"

Clear and distinct rung her voice, filled with scorn and something not far akin to pity. Either that or the name she pronounced, struck home, for the mask turned away and strode across to the iron-barred window, standing motionless for some little time, as though searching for some object of importance.

Della Cameron silently poured out a glass of wine and drank it. Bravely as she had held her own thus far, it had not been altogether without cost. She felt the strain, and not knowing what trials the immediate future might have in store for her, was prudent enough to fortify herself in advance.

The breathing-spell was shorter than she had anticipated, for turning sharply from the barred window with a hard, metallic laugh, her jailer tore off the silken mask, crumpling it in her hand before tossing it aside to fall upon the bed. Removing her gloves and serving them after the same unceremonious fashion, she returned to the table. Standing beside the chair so recently quitted, she stared intently into the dark eyes of her captive, as though thus endeavoring to shatter the unexpected nerve which had baffled her thus far.

Steadily Della Cameron met that gaze, a half-smile in her own orbs and playing about her red lips. And that smile deepened as she noted the red color mounting from cheeks to temples, as she saw how the fire increased in those haughty eyes. Once more she felt that she had won a victory where her jailer had anticipated her defeat.

"Do you know what I am thinking of?" abruptly demanded the Spanish-looking woman. "Since you pretend to look below the surface, do you dare try and read my thoughts just now?"

"How silly you were to think you could play the man well enough to deceive one of your own sex!" smiled Della.

"How easy it would be—and how delicious!—to drive this little toy deep down into that shallow heart of yours!" viciously kissed the woman in masculine garb, her right hand slipping into her bosom, then coming forth and making an almost incredibly swift motion.

Her fingers clasped the jeweled haft of a dagger, and the weapon flashed like a ray of light before the eyes of the captive, the blow being checked with the keen point actually touching Della's bosom. It looked little short of a miracle, though it was really great skill and thorough command of a weapon with which Mercedes del Cavillo had been familiar since infancy.

Once more she seemed to acknowledge defeat, for not a shiver of fear could her glowing gaze detect, not a motion was made to avert or avoid the blow.

"You are not nearly so big a fool as you look, little one!" she cried, abruptly changing her tactics, replacing the glittering weapon and sinking back in the chair she had formerly occupied, pouring out and emptying another glass of the strong wine.

"And you—well, perhaps it would be more polite not to finish what rose to my lips," laughed Della, after a brief pause.

"I mistook your caliber, that I frankly admit," bowed Mercedes, filling both glasses and pushing one across the table to her captive. "I underestimated you. I fancied you a doll, to be frightened or coaxed as the humor took me. I find you a woman, keen-witted, cool and self-reliant."

"Shall I rise and drop a courtesy for the compliments?"

"When did you first suspect that I was playing a part?" abruptly demanded Mercedes.

"I did not begin by suspecting," was the smiling retort. "I knew you were a woman in disguise the instant my eyes fairly opened."

"You mean last night, at the New Ranch?"

"I said the moment I saw you for the first time in that scarlet and black disguise."

"Which was last night, and at the New Ranch. Why beat about the bush after this silly fashion?" impatiently frowned the woman.

"Why persist in playing a game which has been long lost?" retorted Della Cameron. "You were not at the New Ranch last night. Or, if you were, you wore another disguise from that of Prince Lucifer."

Mercedes frowned blackly, and her voice was positively repulsive as she gratingly cried:

"What do you mean? To cast the lie in my very teeth?"

"Since it came from there, why not?" undauntedly.

"Once more, what do you mean?"

"Simply this: you may or may not be the genuine Prince Lucifer who has set the whole Pan-handle up in arms by his bold raids and countless outrages. You may or may not be the inventor and original wearer of that hideous disguise; but you did not wear it last night at the New Ranch. You were not the person who surprised and captured me, with my husband, by the aid of your Imps. You are not the same Prince Lucifer who brought me here; for he was a man, just as surely as you are a woman—in shape!"

While Della Cameron was coldly making these

assertions, Mercedes was pouring out wine and drinking it as with an unquenchable thirst. The action seemed mechanical, for her glowing black eyes never once moved from the pale, resolute face before her.

There was a brief silence as Della concluded. Mercedes sat motionless, her gaze still fixed, her red lips slightly parted. She seemed to be imprinting each feature upon her memory.

Della returned her gaze with almost equal intensity, her eyes slowly taking in each detail, noting each curve and line.

She had more than once heard mention of this woman, of Mercedes del Cavillo; but never until now had she met her face to face.

Tall and well shaped, as could be seen despite the disguising blouse that was loosely buttoned below the waist. Dark, but with a complexion that was marvelously pure and perfect. With jetty hair, showing beneath the velvet smoking-cap. With perfectly arched brows, shadowing great, lustrous eyes, black and liquid as those of a fawn. With cheeks that were tinged with scarlet. With ruby red lips, parted just sufficiently to afford a glimpse of small, even teeth; the only weak point to be seen, for they were slightly discolored by the constant use of cigarettes.

Satisfied with her scrutiny, Della sunk back in her chair, and the motion seemed to awaken Mercedes from her almost trance. With a start she flung back her head, passing one hand hurriedly across her forehead.

Then, with the deepening of the color in her cheeks, she said:

"Think that you are right, if it gives you any consolation, my dear girl," she said, shortly, with a pretended yawn. "But I am Prince Lucifer, and the same Prince Lucifer who captured you at the New Ranch."

"And it took you so long to study up nothing better than that stale falsehood?" sneered Della, in mock surprise. "Well, since you can do no better, let it stay at that. You are Prince Lucifer, and my captor. Of course the bargain still stands? I am to be set at liberty the moment the ransom is paid?"

There was a barely perceptible hesitation, then an affirmative answer. But Della noted that pause before replying, and persisted:

"You are quite sure you are authorized to arrange terms? You are positive no one higher in authority may take a notion to increase or alter your demands after they have been agreed to?"

"Still harping on that string?" sneered Mercedes. "Once more I tell you that, as Prince Lucifer, my will and my word are undisputed. Whatever I say is to be, will be!"

Della Cameron smiled a little dubiously, but replied:

"Of course a lady would not soil her lips with a lie. And equally, of course, I believe all you assert. And now, if you will kindly supply me with writing materials, I will—"

"They are all in the drawer close by your hand," interposed the woman outlaw. "Write from your own point of view, and I'll correct it at my leisure."

Della opened the drawer indicated, finding it supplied with paper, ink and pens. With these she quickly indited a note, telling John Dement of her capture, and the terms on which she would be set at liberty by those in whose power she now found herself. She made no attempt to convey a hint as to her present place of imprisonment, though she made a shrewd guess as to the truth.

She knew that Mercedes del Cavillo occupied an old ranch far up in what was now the Panhandle, but which at the time the ranch was erected, belonged to the independent Republic of Texas. She had heard the old place described, and knew it was of the regulation Spanish pattern, built with an eye to safety from red-skinned marauders. And from the fact that the window in her chamber, plainly one of the most important in the ranch, opened only on the inclosed court, she felt confident that she was imprisoned in the old Rancho del Cavillo.

Without a word she pushed the note across the table to Mercedes, who had filled and emptied more than one glass of wine during the inditing. The Spanish woman took the note and hastily glanced over its contents, a suspicious frown upon her low brow.

"Do you find anything to object to?" coldly asked Della, as her captor stared at the paper much longer than she deemed necessary for even a second perusal. "I believe I have simply set down your own offer, and I know I have added no hint as to my place of keeping."

"You know that, too?" sharply ejaculated Mercedes, frowning darker than ever, and with a dangerous light leaping into her eyes.

"Since I know your name and your place of residence, is it so remarkable that I should guess we now occupy the last?"

"Not remarkable, but it may make a change necessary in my plans," was the low response, accompanied by a dubious smile. "After all, Mrs. Cameron, you are capable of making a mistake, as well as I. With this note, in your handwriting, I can dictate what terms and conditions I see fit, and John Dement will have to agree. And then, what security has either he or you that I will keep my part of the bargain?"

"The knowledge that treachery on your part will surely end in death!" was the quick retort. "I thought of all this before I resolved to pen those lines. If you are not a complete fool—if you are not weary of life—you will also ponder them well!"

"If threats could kill, my grave would have been filled years ago!" scornfully laughed the woman who claimed the title of Prince Lucifer. "And yet, I don't mind saying that I was but trying to scare you a little in revenge for the merciless manner in which you put me to rout a bit ago. For I rather prided myself on my make-up. I laid a wager with—but that does not concern you, my lady!"

The frown returned, and she gazed suspiciously into the placid face opposite her. She checked herself abruptly, flushing hotly as though she felt she had been about to make an imprudent or dangerous revelation. And the better to cover her slip, she poured out more wine and tossed it off at a swallow.

Della dropped her dark eyes, lest they should betray what was going on in her mind. She saw that Mercedes was already beginning to feel the influence of the liquor which she had imbibed so freely. Her tongue was growing garrulous, and her manner less guarded. Unless she should grow alarmed at her own folly, and beat a retreat, ere long, she might let drop something important even to a prisoner!

"Then you admit that I was right?" she ventured, fearing to remain silent too long, now that this new hope had arisen. "You admit that you were at the New Ranch last night? That, in short, you are but an agent for the real Prince Lucifer?"

"That is a lie, little one," bluntly retorted Mercedes, staring across the table with eyes which seemed larger, moister than ever. "I and no other owns that title. I am Prince Lucifer, and glory in it! To think that the demon in scarlet and black who has stirred up the whole Pan-handle, is naught but a woman! And that woman dreaded worse than even the fiend she imitates! Ha! ha! ha!"

Merrily rung her laughter as she lay back in her chair, a wine-glass tipping in her right hand, its ruby contents trickling down over the immaculate tablecloth. And Della joined in the laugh, for she saw that her captor was rapidly yielding to the influence of liquor, and there was one dreadful doubt which she wished to have decided, even though it should be against her dearest hopes.

"It is marvelous, I must admit," she said, as soon as Mercedes tired of laughing. "And the Pan-handle would hang itself for very shame if it knew the actual facts. Yet—you are not the same person who captured me, last night! Of that much I feel fully assured."

"If not me, then who was it?" laughed Mercedes, with a leer. "You who are so good at solving riddles and penetrating mysteries, tell me that."

"The case was altogether different," slowly responded Della, concealing her emotions with a strong effort of will. "One square look at you was enough, for your figure is not one to be easily mistaken for a masculine one, least of all by another woman."

"A compliment, little one?" laughed Mercedes.

"If you take it so, yes," was the quiet response.

"And your visitor at the New Ranch?"

"Was as plainly a man—or, if a woman, with a very masculine figure."

"And his treatment of you during your ride thither? Was that like a man, too?" mockingly insisted Mercedes.

"It might have been worse, I suppose. Still, if he was rough and harsh at times, he spared me insult or injury."

"He did not make love to you, then?" with an ugly sneer.

Della made no answer, save by silence. But there was a look of cold contempt that brought a flush to the face of her inquisitor.

"Then you refuse to make even a guess at his identity?" she persisted, a curious expression in her large eyes that, despite her strong powers of self-control, made Della's heart leap suffocatingly in her throat, for once more she recalled that haunting echo—that echo which reminded her so strongly of bygone days, when Oscar Radford held her allegiance as he still held her love.

"One of your Imps, I suppose," she managed to reply, without too much betraying her emotion and doubts.

"One of my aides, yes," laughed Mercedes, emptying another glass. "Never mind, since he made so little impression on you. It is a rare jest as it stands!"

Della said nothing. Somehow she dreaded to lead up to the subject which was uppermost in her mind, even now that so good an opportunity offered for solving her painful doubts. Fortunately, as it seemed, she was spared this necessity by the wine-limbered tongue of her captor.

"It is all a jest, for that matter," added Mercedes, smoothing out and refolding the note which Della had written to her father. "And this is by no means the poorest portion of the

jest, to my mind! Give me the yellow metal, and those who like can feed on love!"

"Love and jealousy, my dear child! The mainsprings which move all the masculine portion of creation—and which moved you here, too!"

"I am not sure I understand you," slowly uttered Della, forcing herself to face what she longed, yet feared to hear. "I thought you said it was love of gold on your part that led to my abduction?"

"That was my incentive, but how about my gallant aides? Bah! why do you pretend such stupidity? You know that jealousy is at the bottom of the whole affair! You know that jealous love led to all those cunning tricks being played last night!"

"It was admirably played, too, if I do say so—and none have a better right, since I plotted and planned nearly every detail, of course subject to the approval of the man who enlisted me in the work. It was I who stopped David Ashbrook, and sent you that black garb, and it was my hand that carved those words on a bit of sculpture which has lain in my room for years. I stole in from the rear and placed the gift where your awkward maid found it—and might have found me, had she not been so badly frightened—the mole-eyed!" with a laugh of contempt. "I had barely time to hide beneath the table when I heard her coming; I had barely time to slip into the other room, then leap from a window as that wild bull of a father came roaring up-stairs!"

"But it was well worth the trouble—the sport was glorious! And I was well paid, apart from the sum I am yet to receive from your father, precious! He is no niggard, this man who loves you so ardently that he shrinks not from bloodshed to gain possession of your person! Ah! but do I not know? Is it a lie that I am saying, when I swear to you that never yet lived a man who could love more intensely? Never drew the breath of life a man for whom the woman he loved would make a greater sacrifice! Do I not know? Ah! yes—mercy of the saints! but I know too well!"

There was a touch of pathos mingling with the maudlin fervor as Mercedes uttered these words, unconsciously drifting into the peculiar mode of expression which a foreigner never entirely forgets, and which almost certainly shows itself on the surface when excitement grows stronger.

Pale, shivering, with that launting dread become almost a conviction, Della sat back in her chair and watched the flushed face, dreading the words which might follow, yet unable to check or turn aside the velvety flood of speech. She knew that a slight effort would suffice for this, but though she feared to listen, she would not refuse.

"And you, poor fool!" with an angry, yet pitying glance across the table at her captive. "You to throw away such a glorious treasure for a worthless bit of painted glass! To flout him, yet turn with smiles and sweet kisses to such a cur as that Scotchman! It is incredible! I refused to believe when he told me: I swore he was drunk or dreaming; but he made me believe in the end. And then, though it was not so easy, remembering the days of long ago! I consented to aid him in punishing you twain of silly idiots!"

"How? Where is Fergus Cameron now? Where are you? What are you? The bride of an hour! A wife, and yet a maiden! Here, where the man whom you flung aside for another—"

"A lie!" gasped Della, unable to bear more. "He did not—he is not the merciless demon you would make me believe! He did not murder Fergus—he did not!"

The woman started to her feet, biting her lips fiercely, a half-seared look coming into her eyes as the flush died out of her face.

"What have I said—nothing!" with stammering anger. "You are drunk, or going crazy! I know nothing of your Oscar Radford—he is no friend of mine! I hate him, as I hate all men—as I hate you, child!"

She moved away from the chair on which she had rested heavily. She staggered, almost falling, but recovering herself, moved to the door and passed out of the room, muttering and cursing as the barrier closed.

CHAPTER XIII.

PRINCE LUCIFER'S ENVOY.

WITH strangely mingled emotions, John Dement watched Oscar Radford mount and ride rapidly away with his little band of cowboys.

One moment he felt that he was acting right, the next he could hardly resist the mad impulse to leap forward in chase with the vengeful cry for blood upon his lips. At one breath he could almost swear that he was driving from him a good friend and true, whose arm and cool courage, whose clear wits and steady nerves were never more sorely needed than now. At the next he felt more than half convinced that he and his were being duped by a bit of adroit bluffing into permitting the arch-plotter to slip through their fingers.

"Right or wrong, it's too late now!" he muttered with a long breath, as the retreating band passed beyond the swell in the plain.

"Heaven grant that you may never have cause for regretting your great clemency!" gravely uttered Fergus Cameron, as the heavy hand fell from his shoulder for the first time. "I may possibly be wrong, since I did not see the bare face of the scarlet devil who stole away my wife, but before high Heaven! I believe Oscar Radford was that fiend!"

"It is barely possible, but highly improbable," replied Pierson, in his wonted grave manner. "Say that Radford was scoundrel enough for such a vile deed, he would be far too smart to risk his own neck by sparing your life."

A short, hard laugh parted the lips of the Scotchman as he moved toward the building, beckoning John Dement and Pierson to accompany him.

They obeyed, followed by a number of the other ranchers. Fergus Cameron led the way directly to the bridal chamber, through the windows of which the rising sun cast its clear beams. And as he pointed here and there around the room, Cameron spoke coldly, almost sneeringly:

"Was it the fault of that masked demon that I escaped with life? Was it mercy that kindled those fires? You are so good at answering enigmas, Mr. Pierson, that I trust this one will not balk you."

Here and there were scattered little heaps of kindlings, half-charred or wholly burned out. Around each the carpet was burnt and the flooring scorched, but by some strange providence each little pile had failed to thoroughly ignite the building.

"They covered my face, but I could hear them at work," added Cameron after a brief pause. "I could catch the scent of petroleum as they poured it about the room, and then I heard the crackling of flames—after an age of waiting, it seemed! I could smell the smoke and see the red light through the sheet that covered my face, but I was helpless. I could only lie and wait for the coming of death."

"It must have been positive torture," said Pierson, who had been carefully investigating matters, and on whose grave face rested the ghost of a smile as he returned: "And yet, if you will allow me to say so, friend Cameron, it was almost wholly imaginary on your part!"

"I don't think I fully comprehend your meaning, sir."

The reply came prompt and steady.

"You asked me to solve this enigma, and I believe I have done so. Oil was spilt, but not near those little fires. They were ignited, but burnt out without doing any serious damage. This could hardly have happened to them all-four, as you see!"

"Yet everything goes to show that it did happen, incredible as it may seem!" retorted Cameron, with a cold smile.

"And the solution of your enigma covers that also in detail. Those fires were watched and guarded by the hands that kindled them. Their object was to put you on a false trail, and when that was insured, the fires were extinguished here, and the hay-sheds ignited."

"Your explanation runs as glibly as though you had witnessed the affair from beginning to end!" exclaimed Cameron, gazing keenly into that grave, almost sardonic face. "Were your honesty and uprightness one whit less assured, such confident speaking might turn suspicion in your direction, Mr. Pierson."

"It would strike no further from the mark than it does when you charge Oscar Radford with being Prince Lucifer," was the calm response.

From outside arose a sudden outcry, which put an abrupt termination to this warfare of words, and the entire party rushed down-stairs and outside to catch sight of a little cavalcade just coming into view over the swell toward the Dement Ranch.

"It's the women, or I'm a liar! Thar's Sally, fer keeps!" Melancholy Mike spluttered, as he made a dive for his horse, climbing into the saddle and dashing off to meet the new-comers.

"Thar's Kate, sure enough!" muttered John Dement, a trace of color coming back to his haggard face as he recognized the foremost rider. "She couldn't wait fer the news—God bless her!"

Never mind the meeting, the questions and answers. Never mind the countless suggestions as to what was the best and most prominent manner of dealing with the critical emergency which had arisen so unexpectedly. Enough that, after much wasting of words, John Dement concluded to follow the advice given him by Prince Lucifer in that note of warning.

"Ef it's money he wants, I'll pay it to my last cent. Ef it's wuss devility, then he'd work it out all the more sure ef we was to run wild on a blind trail. I'll wait a reasonable len'th o' time fer the word he says he'll send. Ef it don't come—waal, this airth ain't nigh big enough to keep him hid from my eyes!"

And so, back to the ranch the majority of the wedding-party rode, grave and silent for the most part, respecting the heavy burden of sorrow and dread anxiety which the rancher bore, grim and calm though he was to all outward seeming.

Without exception, the ranchers offered what

money they could raise in ready cash, and as simply John Dement accepted their offer.

"They ain't no time to send to town after the cash, fer that critter may be 'long any hour," he said. "I'm pritty well heeled myself, but it's best to keep on the safe side o' the line fence. Ef that imp axes any way nigh the raal value of the little gal, I'll need all the ducats I kin rake an' scrape."

In twos and threes and larger bodies the wedding guests gradually took their departure, until the ranch was left with only its ordinary complement; but before this separation occurred, signals were agreed upon by which the entire neighborhood could be warned and put in the saddle, ready for hot work or hard riding, with scarcely the loss of a minute.

With all this, the day passed far more rapidly than might be imagined, and John Dement was surprised when a casual glance showed him how near to setting was the autumn sun. And the same glance showed him the figure of a single horseman riding rapidly toward the ranch.

"Tain't noways likely it's *that* critter!" he muttered between his teeth, fighting down the choking sensation that rose in his throat. "I ain't lookin' fer him so soon! It's one o' the neighbors, though I cain't place the hoss. 'Course it's one o' the neighbors!"

Even after the horseman came near enough for him to see that he was a stranger, the old man kept muttering to himself that it was not the messenger sent by Prince Lucifer. He was trying to discount the bitter disappointment which he felt would overcome him did he permit himself to indulge in an unfounded hope.

"I reckon I've hit the Dement Ranch?" called out the horseman, checking his panting steed when a few yards away.

"Thar's the boss, an' he's called John Dement," promptly replied one of the cowboys, whom curiosity had drawn forward.

"Thank the Lord for that much, anyway!" muttered the stranger, as he leaped to the ground and strode to where the rancher was standing.

"You're lookin' fer me! You're come from that cussed whelp?" John Dement asked, his voice husky, strained. "Prince Lucifer sent ye?"

"A feller's got to git up an' git when the devil cracks his whip—an' ef he ain't the devil, I don't reckon he's mighty fur this side o' bein' the devil's mate!" half-grinned, half-scowled the stranger.

A rough-clad, coarse-featured man of middle aged, bronzed and weather beaten, his garments showing traces of long wear and hard usage. A face that showed recklessness rather than wickedness. Just such a man as one meets with every day in the cattle-ranges.

"Then ho *did* send you? You come from Prince Lucifer?" persisted John Dement, his dark eyes glowing eagerly.

"It was come here or go to glory by the bullet Express, stranger," a little uneasily muttered the fellow, his gray eyes roving quickly over the scowling faces of the gathering cowboys. "I feel pizen mean over it, but I reckon I'd a' felt worse ef I hadn't come down an' 'greed to do what the critter axed of me!"

"Durn your slack!" growled the rancher, impatiently. "Hav you fetched me any word from Prince Lucifer?"

"I hev that," hastily blurted out the stranger, half-dodging as one of those huge fists came into view.

"Then out with it! What ye waitin' fer?"

"To say that I ain't quite the dirty whelp the boys yender is thinkin'," hastily added the stranger, with another glance at the surrounding cowboys. "To say that I was roped by a couple o' strangers, an' toted off to whar a critter with the face and horns of a devil was waitin' me, an' whar I was give the choice o' death or totin' a message to Dement Ranch, fer—"

"I'll set you right with the boys, never fear," interposed Dement, smothering his hot impatience as best he might. "Come with me, seno the looks o' them skeers you!"

He caught the stranger by the arm and turned back into the house, leading the way to a small room adjoining that in which the wedding ceremony had been performed. He thrust his captive into a chair, and seated himself on the opposite side of the table, then said:

"Out with it, ef you don't want to make me boil clean over! What's the word he sent? What'd he say 'bout my little gal?"

"He gave me this, which he said she had writ fer you, an'—"

John Dement caught the bit of paper from the bronzed hand, and opened it with trembling haste. He drank in the contents at a glance, as it were, and then a great breath escaped his lungs—a mighty sigh of intense relief.

The note was the same which Della Cameron wrote and handed to Mercedes del Caviglio.

"It's her handwrite! She's alive an' well! She says she ain't in no danger o' wuss then bein' kept a pris'ner fer a time! Thank God! it ain't no wuss then that!"

In broken gasps the words escaped his lips. And then, as the big tears filled his bloodshot eyes, John Dement bowed his head on his arms as they rested upon the table.

The messenger shifted uneasily in his seat, but as the shuffling of his heavy boots failed to rouse the rancher, he muttered:

"I hed to do it, stranger! It was come or go to glory a-flukin'! It stuck mighty tight in my craw, when I see what sort o' game I was roped in to, but it was die dog or eat the hatchet! Don't ye see?"

John Dement lifted his head and stretched a hand across the table as he earnestly cried:

"Ef you was a devil right from the blackest pits o' hell, I'd say you are welcome fer fetchin' me this word from my little gal!"

"Shake it is, an' Dart Malone feels like a gamecock once more!" laughed the stranger, his face irradiated by a broad smile. "Durn my gaffs, boss! but I was feelin' wuss then a dunghill which a cyclone hed stripped of every last feather! It was gittin' heap wuss than a brain-blow at the fu'st buckle, but I didn't see it in the same light when that red-black cock give me a choice atwixt a fly with death, or a shake-bag turn over this way. The one was sure death, so I jumped at the other."

"Then you ain't one o' his gang? You don't run with Prince Lucifer?" asked Dement, now that his wild emotions were calming down, his natural clearness of brain returning; and with it a vaguely growing suspicion against this glib-tongued stranger.

"Never set eyes on the breed afore, an' never want to ag'in," was the prompt response. "When I git shet o' this job, I'm goin' to look up another section whar they don't raise sech fightin' cocks! The breed ain't to my notion, nur the rules o' pittin' ain't sech as I'm used to."

"It's mighty strange that the Imp picked out a stranger to kerry his word!" muttered Dement, his suspicions growing stronger with each passing moment.

"It was playin' me dirt the wu'st sort," frankly replied Dart Malone, with a grimace of utter disgust. "I tolle the head cock as much, too, but he didn't even bat a eye as he said that was his lookout. I was to take his message and give it to John Dement without change or trimmin'. Ef I did an' brung back proof sech as you must give me, that I'd done my errand, I might go whar I durned pleased after. Ef I didn't do it jest right—waal, I'd be counted out without havin' even a chance to git in a lick fer the strangers!"

There was a brief silence, during which John Dement keenly scrutinized the face of his opposite. Apparently there was naught but bluff heartiness to be seen there.

"You don't see it plum cl'ar, it looks like," laughed Dart Malone, with a slight toss of his grizzled head. "Waal, let it go at that. I ain't thinkin' of settlin' down in this walk, so you'n I ain't anyways apt fer to cross each other when I've once got this business off my han's. Call me one o' the gang, ef that suits ye any better, an' then we'll hurry up the weighin' in!"

John Dement flushed a little at this blunt speech, and said:

"I don't reckon it's as bad as that, but even ef it was, I'm mighty glad to see you, sence you bring word from that critter. What did he hev to say? Did he write, or jest give you his words?"

"He offered to write, but I kinder prefarrd the other way," grinned Malone, with a significant wink. "Mebbe I'd run foul o' some stray chickins out on the bunt fer Prince Lucifer, an' mebbe they'd take jest sech fool's picions as troubles you. Mebbe they'd go through my wardrobe an' sech a letter o' 'tructions mightn't be healthy fer me! I could take oath I found the note writ by the leddy, but hardly all two both on 'em, don't ye see?"

"I see that you're monstrous fond o' listenin' to your own tongue go clatter!" growled Dement, impatiently. "Durn your reasons! What did Prince Lucifer bid you tell me?"

"That he held your daughter fer ransom. That he valued her at the market price o' gold, pound fer pound, ounce fer ounce. That she tipped the scales at one-twenty-five, solid. That eighteen dollars stood fer an ounce, an' sixteen times one-twenty-five come to an even two thousand ounces. Multiply one by t'other, an' you hev \$36,000, which ekils the gal. I'ay the one an' you kin take away the other!" tersly rattled off the glib-tongued Dart Malone.

"Ef I pay over that much money, I'm to git my child back ag'in, safe an' sound as she is now—as she was when she writ that note?"

"So the boss devil told me to say," was the prompt response.

"Then you kin go back an' tell him that I'm agreed!" impulsively exclaimed John Dement, springing to his feet as though he considered the interview at an end.

But Dart Malone made no motion to imitate his example, leaning back in his chair and gazing up with a quizzical light in his little gray eyes.

"Ef you're tired squattin', an' want to stand up fer a change, all right, pardner," he grinned; "but ef you think it's done up an' over with, I'm mighty sorry to say that I've got a heap more talkin' to do afore I'm free o' the oath that red-horned critter made me take!"

"You've named your figgers, an' I've 'greed

to meet 'em!" growled the old rancher, frowning blackly. "What more is they to talk over?"

"The way the exchange is to be made, the place, the time, an' some other little dee-tails which you don't 'pear to 'member, boss."

The frown vanished and a faint smile took its place. John Dement sunk back in his seat, muttering apologetically:

"I've undergone a heap o' trouble, stranger, an' my brain ain't jest as cl'ar as it mought be. I did fergit, but I'll listen to ye now."

"I ain't kickin' on my own hook, mind ye," earnestly responded Dart Malone, leaning over the table. "I'm only kerryin' out what I swore to do ef that red devil let me go with a hull gizzard. I've got to go back to him, an' he'll ax me mighty close what I said an' what I fergot to say. Ef I cain't tell a straight story, from open to shet, off'll go my head fer a pot-pie, dead sure!"

"Go on; I'm listenin'."

"You're to take the money, in gold or good greenbacks, an' pay it over to Prince Lucifer himself. If the count is all right, an' you don't try to come any tricks over him, your daughter'll be sent back."

"Sent back!" sharply cried Dement, suspicion flashing into his face at the words. "When I pay the money, I must have her given to me!" "That's one p'int Prince Lucifer made," was the calm response. "He said over twice that you hed to pay the money fu'st. He wouldn't take no chances on the deal. When he'd got the money safe, then he'd turn her over to you; but pay fu'st, or the barg'in was off fer good!"

"He won't trust me, but makes me trust him!"

"That's the p'int, pardner. He makes you trust him, I reckon, beca'se he's a maker! It's a way some critters hev, when they git the upper hand. You kin kick, ef you like, but I don't reckon it'll mount to much good in the eend."

"You're right. I can't afford to kick. Go on," growled Dement.

"You're to fetch the money your own self. You're to come to the place Prince Lucifer marked down on this bit o' paper, when he couldn't make me understand' right sure whar he meant," added Malone, passing a square of paper across to the rancher, who studied it for a few moments before speaking; but when he did so, it was with certainty:

"I know the place well enough! Thar's the Split Rock, an' this red cross is a little to the south an' east of it!"

"A mile or so, the critter said, to make all sart'in. Whar that red cross is, he'll meet you of you don't try to play any tricks fer to ketch him an' make him pay fer your gal, 'stead o' hard money."

"It's easy to see that a durned thief an' rascal laid down the law!" grimly laughed the rancher.

"Sence he looks fer double dealin' in you, eh?" grinned Malone, in no wise disconcerted by this blunt speech. "Waal, that's a mighty pile o' money, an' ef a body could snatch it out o' the fire, why he'd be a monstrous fool ef he didn't make the rifle, now I tell you!"

"Not with the life of my pore child hangin' in the balance!"

"Waal, they is somethin' in that, come to think! But to git back:

"You're to go thar all by yourself, an'—"

"To be waylaid an' killed for the gold?" cried Dement, suspiciously. "I looked for a trap, an' right here I kin spot it!"

Dart Malone frowned, hesitating before he spoke again, slowly:

"He swore they wasn't no trap. He said he wouldn't come out to meet you, unless he was dead sure you come alone. An' yit—ef you keer to run the resk, you kin take your men to the edge o' the plain, leavin' them in kiver while you ride straight north until you sight Prince Lucifer. You're to go, or git thar, jest as the sun gits level with the hill, to-morrow afternoon."

"I'll do that," slowly responded Dement. "I'm willin' to run any reasonable resk, fer her sake, but not to throw away my money an' my life too, 'long o' the chainco o' settin' her free!"

"I'm goin' beyond my orders when I say you kin take your men so fur, but I don't reckon the boss'll kick too hard, ef you don't try to run 'em in on him. That won't work. He'll be on the keen lookout, an' he swore that your fu'st try at a trick would be the sure death o' the gal you wanted to git back."

"I'll go bail he sha'n't see my boys unless he tries to go through me by force," quietly responded the rancher.

"Then all's lovely, an' the web-foot kin look down on all creation from its roostin' place!" laughed Dart Malone rubbing his hands as if highly gratified by the success of his mission. "An' now, boss, ef you will be so mighty kind as to give me a sip o' colored water, jest to keep my throat open while you scratch out a few lines to tell Prince Lucifer I've done the ugly job he set me up in fu'st-class style, I'll begin to feel a little more like a cock in trainin' then I hev sence I fu'st fluttered into the wrong walk! 'Deed I jest will, now!"

John Dement placed a bottle and glass before the envoy, then sat down to write out the suggested acknowledgment. He passed the lines across to Dart Malone for his approval, and

when that worthy expressed himself satisfied, he asked:

"Will you carry back a note to my little gal? Mebbe it'll help to keep her spirits up until I kin see her free ag'in."

"I'll tote it as nigh as Prince Lucifer'll let me, ef that'll satisfy you," laughed the envoy, promptly.

"That's all I ax," said Dement, rapidly writing a few lines, handing the note to Malone without sealing. "Show it to him, an' ax him from me to give it to my child. Ef he ain't all devil, he'll do it!"

Dart Malone passed out of the ranch in Dement's company, pausing with foot in stirrup to warn him that any attempt to follow his trail would be fatal to his hopes; then he mounted and rode swiftly away.

CHAPTER XIV.

SALLY AND MIKE IN CLOSE QUARTERS.

MELANCHOLY MIKE was "all business" on that day, and apparently had not a moment to spare for idle gossiping with his mates over the startling events which had turned the Dement Ranch "upside down."

"But he ain't nigh the fool he looks, Mike ain't!" positively declared one of the cowboys, and this testimony deserves particular mention, for it was the first time that John Dumpling ever gave the fat cow-puncher an unqualified word of praise. "He played both ends ag'in' the middle, an' won every clatter!"

There was something in this, too. Either John Dement had too much of more importance to think of, or else he was not mortally offended by the bold action of Melancholy Mike on behalf of Oscar Radford. The fat cowboy himself rather expected an explosion, when all was over, and mentally deciding that he might as well be hanged for a fat beef as a starveling calf, set to work with an eye single to the interests of the young rancher whom he, as well as Sally, felt had been shamefully insulted as well as wronged by Ferguson Cameron.

And hardly had they reached Dement Ranch again when Melancholy Mike set to work to win Sally over to his particular point of view.

Sally was very much meeker than she had been before that interview in the kitchen when Melancholy Mike cast off the bonds of servitude and used her feminine dread of fire-arms and "a mussed-up" floor to coax the reluctant virgin into "signing the bond." It had been a long and determined struggle on her part, but now that she had fairly admitted defeat in love's lists, Sally proved herself very much a woman after all. Of course there would be occasional lapses into the old regime, but already Melancholy Mike was letter perfect in the new art of taming, and he did not hesitate to use the curb.

"It's fer the good o' Miss Della, you know, Sally," he persisted; and that was sufficient to complete his victory, though the maid went about her task with fear and trembling and sundry tears of shame.

Melancholy Mike was among the first to notice the coming of Dart Malone, and he at once decided that this stranger must be the expected envoy of the kidnapper. And with this belief, to keep from running any unnecessary risks, he stole hastily around the house and startled Sally by his abrupt entrance into the kitchen.

"Hold your hush, pritty!" he hastily muttered, stifling the ejaculation after a very loverly fashion which need not be more particularly described just at present. "The critter's come, an' ef the boss fetches him in the ranch, you 'nd me's got to take in all they say, ef it breaks our back!"

"I hope he won't! I hope an' pray they'll do the talkin' outside whar you kin hear without—it shivers me all over, jest to think!" murmured Sally, hiding her face on the fat cowboy's shoulder, through very shame.

"It's fer her, mind ye, Sally!" soothingly uttered Mike, his ears strained to catch what was passing without. "It's fer him, too! It ain't beca'se we want to listen on our own hooks, nurfer no mischief or sech like, but beca'se—durned if it ain't jest as I thunk, Sally!"

John Dement was leading the way into the ranch, followed by another footprint, which could be no other than that of the stranger.

Mike's eyes glittered and snapped, his honest face filling with grim pride as he saw how timely his forethought had been. Sally moaned and bored her face still deeper into the bosom of her lover, feeling only shame that she should be forced to play the spy and eavesdropper on the man whose money she had accepted for so many years.

"Sally, the sin an' shame's all my own," whispered Melancholy Mike, giving a wink at vacancy, but replacing his smile with a look of solemn resignation as he lifted the virgin's head until she was forced to open her leaking eyes. "Sally, you kin say with a clear conscience that I was brute an' warmint enough fer to obledge ye; that I tuck ye by the thrapple like this," with a very gentle touch to illustrate, "an' swore by heaven an' airth an' the other place that ef you didn't find me a hole whar I could listen easy, I'd blow your brains to never-come-back-ag'in this side o' glory—jest so!"

Melancholy Mike held a revolver covering the shivering maid, but the barrel was in his hand, and the harmless butt only stared her in the face! And seeing nothing else for it, Sally yielded.

Two minutes later the twain were stowed away in a dark closet adjoining the room in which were seated John Dement and Dart Malone. A number of tiny holes had been recently made through the pine partition, and thus the listeners were enabled to catch every word which passed between the two men beyrnd.

This was the uncomfortable work which Melancholy Mike had persuaded the upright Sally to perform. Not only in this one case, but so determined was he that not a chance should be lost that every room on the lower flor was all ush-ed in much the same manner.

Of course, as he was reminded by the reluctant Sally, time and again before she finally yielded to his persuasions and her own love, it might be labor thrown away; it might be unnecessary degradation; it was highly probable that John Dement would listen to the message sent by Prince Lucifer without any disguise, in the presence of his faithful cowboys. But then again the envoy might have some reasons for speaking in secret. And it was not always safe to decide beforehand on what course John Dement himself would pursue, however strong the probabilities might be.

As he crouched down in the prepared closet, Melancholy Mike hugged himself (metaphorical) for his shrewd foresight, and hugged Sally (literally) for her own sweet sake and his own delectation combined.

His had been a long and hard fight against heavy odds, and though he had conquered in the very moment of defeat, as it seemed, that alarm of fire had come far too soon for him to have fully repaid himself for all his toil and tribulations. And since then he had hardly had a chance to snatch a kiss or covert hug, until now.

It was a shameful abuse of power and time, of course, and an outrage on a helpless maiden, who could only suffer and submit in fear and trembling, just as she would have accepted death itself rather than by struggle or scream have exposed her eavesdropping to John Dement. It is with a blush for my sex that I record the fact; but Melancholy Mike punctuated each sentence with a hug, and filled the brief periods of silence with kisses.

After all, the fat cowboy was but human. He knew when he had a good thing, to use the vernacular, and naturally made the most of it.

Doubtless he should have been ashamed of his conduct and of himself, but undoubtedly he was not. The closet was dark and small, so small that even coy Sally had not the ghost of a chance to dodge her persecutor. The atmosphere was little less than that of an oven. But it was with positive reluctance that Melancholy Mike left his close quarters after the departure of Dart Malone.

His face was more than usually red and moist when he came out into the light of day, at last, but there was no shame to be seen there, no abashed light in his honest blue eyes. And with a quick glance about the kitchen, to make sure no curious eyes were taking notes, Mike caught Sally to his capacious bosom and kissed her again, "just for luck, little wiman!"

And Sally? Blushing furiously, of course; her hair "twenty ways for Sunday" her collar unpinned, and her apron twisted awry.

But though there was a rapicof upon her tongue, there was a love-light in her eye that "took off the curse" most effectually.

"Sally, ef you step up them holes I'll never forgive ye!" whispered Mike, with a parting squeeze and a passing sip. "I'm goin' to listen every time a live critter goes into that room, an' you've—"

"Ketch me!" murmured Sally, slipping out of his grasp.

Well, there is an end to all things, and though he reluctantly tore himself away from the charmer whom he had trailed so long and hopelessly, Melancholy Mike could not entirely forget what he had set himself about. And after the evening meal had been disposed of, and the rest of the cowboys had returned to their various duties, the fat member stole away from the ranch to the little hollow in which he had picketed his horse hours before, without attracting notice or curiosity.

Mounting, he rode away at a rapid pace, halting not until he came within sight of the Redford Ranch. Checking his good steed, Melancholy Mike alighted, driving home the picket-pin, leaving the animal to feed on lariat, while he advanced afoot.

There was no light to be seen about the premises. Not a sound to indicate the presence of human life, but Melancholy Mike had not completed a quarter circuit of the ranch, with its outbuildings before he came to an abrupt halt in obedience to the sharp challenge:

"Stop right thar, stranger! Who be ye, an' what's yer business?"

"Fri'nd, an' lookin' fer a word with Boss Radford," was the prompt response, as Melancholy Mike flung up his hands, empty, and with outturned palms.

"You got a name, I reckon?"

"You'd ought to know Mike Diggs, Jim Simpson."

"What's the matter out there?" cried a clear, stern voice from the front of the ranch.

"Nothin' bigger than I be, boss," laughed Melancholy Mike. "I've got somethin' to whisper in them years o' yours that'll make 'em twinkle wuss than a star on a shootin' 'scursion, ef you'll be so good as to choke off Jim Simpson with his gun."

"Let him pass, Simpson," called out Radford, advancing to meet the fat cowboy. "Is it news about her, Mike?" he muttered, his voice growing unsteady, the moonlight showing his face pale and anxious.

"That's what!"

"Not bad news, then!" with a sigh of intense relief as he noted the broad smile which illumined Mike's face.

"That's how it turns out, boss," with a graver look and more serious tone, as they moved toward the ranch. "I cain't say fer sure, but mebbe you kin look deeper into it then I kin. Now ef it was my Sally that was in sech a hobbble, why—"

"Word has come from Prince Lucifer, then?"

Melancholy Mike coughed slightly, casting a suspicious glance about them. Though he said not a word, Oscar Radford readily comprehended his meaning, and said no more until they were safely seated in his private apartment, safe from curious eyes or listening ears.

"Now tell me what news you bring, and be in a hurry, Mike!"

Melancholy Mike obeyed, telling all that passed between Dart Malone and John Dement, but placidly ignoring his own actions beyond the simple fact that he had eavesdropped them. And never a word did he mention of the part played by Sally, to his credit be it spoken.

"Now, I may be wrong, boss," he said, in conclusion. "Mebbe I'm a fool fer thinkin' anything wrong, but it hit me mighty hard that they was a dirty job bein' putt up on the old man."

"You think it is a trap to catch him and his money?"

"That's what!" with an emphatic nod.

For a few moments Oscar Radford sat in silence, his dark eyes downcast, his fingers nervously playing with a half-burnt match which lay upon the table between them. There was a troubled frown upon his brow, an uneasy twitching of his red lips.

"Even ef it is all on the square," added Mike, earnestly, "I knowed you'd like to hear it as soon as I could git the word here. Them was mighty ugly words the Scotchman flung out at ye to-day."

"Words that he shall eat in public, too!" fiercely muttered the young rancher.

"I want to be nigh enough to see him chawin' on 'em, I do!" grumbled Mike, with an emphatic nod of his bullet-head. "An' that's why I made sech a hurry to git here with the word."

"You have an idea of some sort, Mike?"

"I often do, but this is a good one, ef I do say it! What's to hinder us from lookin' on when the boss goes to pay that money? Why cain't we be nigh enough fer to see which way the devil-imp goes when he's got the ducats? What's the reason we cain't trail him to his hole, an' when the little lady is out o' trouble, wade in an' jest nat'rally yank the critter from taw. Eh?"

"It might be done," slowly muttered Radford.

Melancholy Mike stared at the frowning rancher with drooping jowls. He had expected Radford to leap eagerly at the chance thus offered to clear himself in the eyes of the public, by bringing the real Prince Lucifer to justice.

Instead, Oscar was scowling darkly, like one who has just heard bad instead of good news. Surely the charge of Fergus Cameron had no foundation in truth? Surely he had not been so terribly mistaken in his faith? Sally deceived?

Oscar Radford glanced quickly toward the fat cowboy, and caught that gradually-growing suspicion, and instantly his brows cleared, his hand shot across and gripped that of the cowboy, pressing it warmly as he uttered:

"If I didn't jump at the chance, Mike, it was because I wanted to first make sure our acting as you suggest wouldn't work harm to Miss—to John Dement's daughter. If she was to be set free when the ransom money was paid, it would be clear enough. And as it is, I think we can make the rifle!"

"We kin try mighty hard, anyway!" laughed Mike, forgetting his faint suspicions the moment Radford spoke.

"You are sure you succeeded in leaving the place without being noticed?" slowly asked Radford, his face clouding again.

"Dead sure!" was the confident response.

"You may be missed. Dement may want you to go with the rest of the boys, to-morrow. Your absence just now may arouse awkward suspicions, Mike, and I reckon it will be wisest for you to go back to-night. I can do the work alone, thanks to your hints."

"Suspicious be durned!" muttered Mike, a

dogged expression coming over his honest face. "I ain't goin' back. I'm goin' to take a sly look at that Prince Lucifer, an' ef you don't want me long—"

"I'd pick you from an army, Mike, but I fear your absence may put Cameron on the watch."

"What's he got to do with it? He ain't my boss!"

Radford gazed intently into the face of his visitor for a full minute without speaking. He seemed trying to read the truth there. To be inwardly debating a troublesome doubt.

"Mike, you faced Cameron pretty blunt, today!" he said, at length.

"It didn't come awful hard, nuther!" laughed the cowboy.

"You don't love him quite as much as you do Miss Sally, then?"

"I don't like him fer a cent, boss!" with an emphatic nod.

"Mike, I'm going to trust you further than I would trust any man on earth except yourself!" abruptly uttered Radford, leaning forward and adding, guardedly: "Although I can bring no positive proof of my suspicions, just yet, I believe that Fergus Cameron is at the bottom of all this trouble! I believe that he connived at the abduction of John Dement's daughter last night, even if he didn't have it done on his sole responsibility!"

"Waal, I will be durned!" gasped Mike, literally stupefied.

"I can almost take oath that he is the head rascal—that he is Prince Lucifer himself!"

Melancholy Mike shook his head spasmodically.

"He couldn't ketch hisself an' do all that way! He couldn't—"

"Through his men, he could. But never mind that, just now. I've told you what has been troubling me for many weeks. This, more than my losing Della Dement, has made me wretched. For her sake, you understand. I felt that Cameron was a rascal, but I couldn't positively brand him as one, without more time for investigation. If I had charged him with being Prince Lucifer, and failed in proving my suspicions, it would all be laid to jealousy, and a desire to get even for my being thrown over in his favor."

"It's a turrible muxed up a'fa'r, anyway!" feebly muttered Melancholy Mike, completely dumfounded.

Oscar Radford seemed to think much the same, for he made no further effort to clear away the fog. He sat scowling moodily, twiddling the blackened bit of wood, until Mike rallied sufficiently to say:

"I reckon we'd better be pullin' foot, hedn't we? Ef we ain't to take no chancies o' bein' spotted by them critters, I reckon it'd be best fer to git that nigh as we kin afore day comes."

"You are right, Mike!" ejaculated Radford, casting off the moody spell which hampered him, mind and body, springing to his feet. "I'll see about the horses at once!"

"I've got my own critter hard by, an' he's good enough fer the trip, I reckon. But I say, boss!"

"Well, Mike?"

"We're goin' alone. An' I wouldn't let out anythin' that your boys could hitch the truth to ef I was you."

"Of course not," was the prompt response. "It's spying, not fighting, we're bound on, this trip. Afterward—well, time enough then."

Five minutes later the two men were riding swiftly away over the plain, heading direct for the landmark known then, as now, by the name of the Split Rock.

The sun was sinking low in the Western horizon, as Oscar Radford uttered a low ejaculation, lifting his head and turning his eyes from the magnificent field-glass he held in his hands to the round face of his companion, Melancholy Mike.

"I caught a glimpse of him just then, Mike!"

"Whar'abouts, boss?"

"Down yonder, near the head of that coulee! I can't see him now, but I'm dead sure I made no mistake—though how he managed to get there without my sighting him before, beats me hollow!"

"Mebbe he's the devil he claims to be, boss!" muttered Melancholy Mike, with a faint grin that could not entirely cover his actual superstition. "Mebbe he jest slipped up through the ground!"

"Devil enough, no doubt!" with a dark frown. "But not the same sort you have reference to. Not so much the devil that I'll miss bringing him to book for his many crimes! Not a bigger devil than Fergus Cameron, I'll wager my head!"

"I cain's git it through me that you're on the right trail thar, boss," muttered Melancholy Mike, for this was not the first time that day they had argued the point. "I don't like the man. Sally don't like him nuther. I know he ain't half-fit fer to marry Miss Dell, nur nobody else ain't, fer that matter; but he's wuss! I don't take a cent's wu'th o' stock in the critter, but I cain't think he's that red devil!"

"Time will show, Mike," more quietly uttered Radford, his eyes once more at the glass, slowly

sweeping the extensive view before them. "I'm banking my money one way, and you're backing the opposite. We can't both be right, but we needn't come to blows over a matter of taste."

"See anythin' more o' the p'izen critter, boss?" asked Mike, after a brief silence.

"No. Nor can I make out anything of his gang."

"Mebbe he didn't fetch 'em."

"Don't think it Mike. They're hid away snug enough, ready to play their part when the right time comes. Prince Lucifer is mortal enough, to want a sure thing of it, and though he bade Dement come alone into this level, be sure he won't care to face the old man without good backing hard by!"

"Mebbe we hain't got quite as soft a snap as we thought at fu'st!" suddenly muttered Mike, his round face growing oval, an uneasy look coming into his honest blue eyes.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Radford, glancing around.

"It's the real Prince Lucifer we want, ain't it?"

"Of course. And I'm betting high we'll get him, too!"

"Not if you're right in thinkin' Ferg Cameron's the man, though!" and Melancholy Mike shook his head decidedly. "The boss sent him word to the New Ranch afore I set out to find you. He come, hot-foot, an' Sally said she hearn' em plannin' how to make the trip to-day. Cameron'll be with the boys the boss leaves ahind him when he strikes the open; an' devil or no devil, he cain't be in two places at once!"

"If he's what I feel positive, we'll get him in the end," was the quiet response. "If he's the real Prince Lucifer, the fellow in hiding down yonder is acting under his orders. Most likely he is the one who has charge of Miss Della. If we can trail him to his hiding-place, and catch him, it won't be hard to make him squeal to save his own neck."

"Mebbe you're right, but I cain't see it as cl'ar as I'd like."

Radford once more reverted to his glass, this time sweeping it slowly along the lower edge of the plain, suddenly arresting its motion and holding it steady for a brief space. Then he lifted his head once more and spoke, his voice full of excitement:

"We'll soon know the truth, Mike! Down yonder comes a horseman, and he's herding this way! Beyond a reasonable doubt, it is John Dement with the ransom money, come to keep his appointment with Prince Lucifer!"

And with breathless interest they watched all that followed.

CHAPTER XV.

A WOMAN WITHOUT MERCY.

As the door closed behind the unsteady form; as the rattle of bars and clanking of chains told that once more her imprisonment was complete; Della Cameron drew a long, shivering breath, and cowered lower down in her chair, pale as though death-stricken.

She had displayed far more nerve than might have been expected under the circumstances, but now her overtired powers gave way, and all together.

It was not her own personal peril that lent her the strength and steady nerve to fight the good fight. After the first natural doubts, she felt comparatively at ease on that point. Prince Lucifer was working for gold, and would hardly damage the goods he offered for sale, at least until after the ransom was safely in his own hands.

With this fear quieted down, and her brain grown clear enough to reason over the curious events of that night, Della next decided that if Prince Lucifer meant the death of Fergus Cameron, he would not have run a risk by leaving him bound to suff... from the blazing ranch. Even if he desired such an idea to be entertained, he would slay first, and trust to the flames to remove that evidence of violence.

And this left her but the one knotty, delicate point to solve: the reason why Prince Lucifer spoke with the voice of Oscar Radford.

She spoke truly when she said that her first glance revealed the attempted imposition; that this visitor was not the same as the man who brought her to that place; that behind the silken mask was the face of a woman! Though the masculine garments were worn with the careless ease of one to whom they were by no means novel, the figure of Mercedes del Cavillo was hardly one which another woman could mistake after suspicion was once awakened.

Then it was that Della Cameron attempted to solve her painful doubts by adroitly springing the trap, by taking this counterfeit Prince Lucifer by surprise.

Her hopes increased as she saw how freely Mercedes partook of the generous wine, for she knew that, when drunkenness came in, wit and coolness went out. And so—

She shivered pitifully as she crouched there in her chair, covering her ghastly pale face with her hands. She had succeeded even too well! Better for her had she never attempted to solve the meaning of that haunting echo.

"It is false!" she gasped, uncovering her pale

face and flashing a swift, hunted glance around the room. "She lied! I will not believe it!"

But even as she spoke, a faint moan rose in her throat, and she once more covered her face, shivering like a storm-tossed leaf. For she could not deceive herself, try as she might. She could not help believing that Oscar Radford was Prince Lucifer!

That was the reason why the voice of Prince Lucifer so haunted her memory when the masked outlaw grew warm with his taunts! That was why his figure seemed so familiar.

And if Mercedes del Cavillo had not actually uttered his name in her wine-reckless moments she had said quite enough to determine those suspicions. She had spoken of jealousy, of the revenge which a jilted lover would naturally be expected to take. She had spoken of the man who played the role of Prince Lucifer, as one who had been thrown over by her in favor of Fergus Cameron.

Surely that was plain enough? Too plain!

"And I loved him so! God help me! I love him still!" moaned Della Cameron, shivering convulsively as she lay in utter wretchedness.

It was even so. Even when quarreling, even when making preparations for her hasty wedding with another, Della knew now that her love had never died. While the excitement lasted she had contrived to make herself believe that it had. She had even declared to herself, and believed that assertion, that she loved Fergus Cameron far more truly and wholly than she had ever loved Oscar Radford. Only for this belief she would not have married him, piqued though she was by the stern obstinacy of her lover.

The scales fell from her eyes while she was waiting for the coming of the tardy bridegroom, but it was too late then to retreat. John Dement would never permit her, and she shrunk from giving the guests fresh cause for gossip.

And now—she knew that the man she loved was the worst of outlaws! That he was a thief, a footpad, an assassin!

That knowledge was bad enough, but still worse was the knowledge that she loved him even now, despite the load of sin upon his head!

Della Cameron was still brooding over the miserable affair when the rattling of chains warned her of another caller, or another visit from Mercedes del Cavillo. Instinctively she sought to conceal her wretchedness, and did manage to resume her outward calmness, though her reddened lids and pale face remained to betray her.

It was Mercedes who entered, pale, stern, showing her recent intoxication in her movements.

In silence she closed the door and waited while some one on the outer side replaced the fastenings. She moved over to the chair which she had occupied before, dropping into it, her dark eyes fixed sternly upon the face of her captive across the little table.

Della returned her gaze, and something in the eyes of her captor lent her renewed strength and courage. It was not pity that she read there. It was hatred, deep, evil, merciless; hatred such as a woman utterly without conscience might feel for a successful rival who lies helplessly at her mercy.

So Della interpreted that steady gaze, and somehow it seemed just what her shaken nerves required to brace them up for another struggle. A word of pity, of attempted consolation, would have completely broken her down just then.

"I know that I have played the fool," abruptly uttered Mercedes, her voice harsh and grating. "I know that while I drank I talked too freely with you. What did I say?"

"More than I can recall, just at present," responded Della, her own tones far from sounding naturally.

"More than you care to acknowledge, you mean!"

There was no response to this savage retort. Although she felt so positive that Oscar Radford must be the criminal her fears had painted him, Della felt that wild longing to know more, to know the whole truth, returning with redoubled force. For a few moments she fought against the temptation, but then she yielded. Surely it was best to forever put her haunting doubts at rest!

"You told me nothing more than I already more than suspected," she said, acting on the impulse of the moment.

"And that—what did you suspect?"

"That you are only a tool, working in this evil business for another. And that other—Oscar Radford!"

It was hard to utter that name, but she obliged her lips to sound the syllables clearly, without any extraordinary emotion. If her tones were unnatural, if they trembled, the Spanish woman seemed too deeply agitated herself to notice the fact.

"Did I say so much?" she cried, with a start of admirably simulated amazement. "Truly, I must have been drunk!"

"You were drunk enough to speak the truth, at least!"

Mercedes made no immediate reply to this retort. Her eyes were averted, one hand pushing

a red lip between her teeth, the other toying with the haft of the stiletto that nestled in her bosom. A brief space thus, then she again faced her captive with a hard, vicious laugh.

"Well, what is done cannot be undone, and I don't know as I am so very sorry, after all! What matters a few hours, more or less? You must have known the truth some time. And if from my lips, you will be a little better prepared for his acknowledgment when it comes!"

"You mean Oscar Radford?"

"You mentioned the name, not I!" with a short laugh. "I do not believe I was ever idiot or drunk enough to ever mention it!" with sudden suspicion in her voice and blazing eyes. "You are a cunning imp, for all your simple looks, and you trapped me once—bah! As I said, what matter? You will know all when he comes, and if I've made a slip, he will be the gainer!"

"And for my trap, as you call it, you are setting another to get even with me!" laughed Della, with perfect acting.

"What do you mean?"

"That you are trying to lead me astray on a false scent. Oscar Radford had no more to do with this vile piece of work, than an angel just out of heaven!"

Mercedes flashed a swift glance into the speaker's face, surprise and doubt mingling together, but then she drooped her lids with a low, relieved laugh as she said:

"You are a little demon for insight! It is useless to try to pull the wool over those keen eyes, I see!"

Della made no answer. Her head sunk for a moment, her face turning ghastly pale. She had hoped against reason, until that instant. She spoke thus, feeling that if Mercedes was trying to deceive her as to Oscar Radford, she would say something to combat that pointed accusation. Instead, she eagerly caught at the chance of covering the slip she had made while under the influence of drink.

A low, grating oath passed through the clinched teeth a moment later, and Della glanced up to see Mercedes frowning blackly.

"You little devil!" she grated, her hands clinched tightly, her great darkeyes fairly flashing with anger, her face convulsed. "You play me for a fool again! You set a trap for my feet, and push me into it that you may laugh—bah!" with another of her sudden transitions, flinging out her hands and shrugging her shoulders. "I am ashamed that I have no more control of my temper! You will soon set me down as a veritable shrew!"

Despite the sickening pain at her heart, Della could not help smiling faintly at this absurd speech.

"You laugh at that, eh?" snapped Mercedes, her eyes seeming jealously keen. "Very well! It is those who have the last laugh that fares the best, our wise men say, and you may prove it true before long."

"If I laugh, it is at your folly in trying to make me believe Oscar Radford an innocent man, after so plainly identifying him with Prince Lucifer when your wits were befogged with wine!"

"He is not Prince Lucifer!" sharply retorted the Spanish woman.

"Can you swear on yonder cross that he did not hire you to aid him in this vile outrage?" slowly demanded Della, pointing to a crucifix fastened to the wall.

Mercedes glanced in the direction of the outstretched hand, and instinctively her own fingers made the sign of the cross before her bosom. The flush died out of her dark face, and her voice was low, dogged as she made reply:

"You are a heretic—you do not believe in that blessed emblem! You have no power to exact such an oath from my lips!"

"You have answered me, and just as truthfully as you could though you took a score of oaths," muttered the captive, her voice betraying how little comfort or triumph she took in her victory.

A Spanish oath hissed over the red lips, and Mercedes poured out a glass of wine, tossing it off with a reckless abandon that showed she either forgot what had so recently happened, or else that she had nothing further to guard against.

"It was the truth when I said little devil!" she snarled, showing her slightly discolored teeth with a pantherish smile. "You would play tricks on Satan himself, and he'd never suspect that dainty little face belonged to a cat until he felt the smart of your claws!"

"Well, I am not so sorry, since it might have been worse. You might have proved the empty-pated doll I at first believed you, and that would touch me deeper than even his treachery!"

Della sank back in her chair, her eyes closing. She knew the worst now, and nothing this black-browed woman could say had interest for her.

Mercedes watched her captive for a brief space in silence. There was an evil light in her black eyes, a hard, cruel smile playing about her red lips.

No one who saw her then could have mistaken the bitter hatred which she felt for Della Cameron, or the peculiar delight which she would feel in adding to her evident torture.

"You are suffering, little one!" she said, with a low, mocking laugh that betrayed her real triumph in making this discovery. "You play a bold game, but you do not know the art of winning or losing without letting your face tell tales to those who watch! After all, I would not change places with you, even if you have stolen away the love that was all mine—that would still be all mine, but for that baby face!"

"What do you mean?" asked Della, startled from her half-stupor by this fierce, yet triumphant speech.

"Does that touch you, little one?" tauntingly. "Good! I can sting you a little, can I? That is better! If I can make you suffer a little what care I for my own hurts! Nothing!"

"See, you! Am I hideous? Am I too old and ugly for a man to keep on loving? Am I fading and growing full of wrinkles? Even you have not the impudence to say yes; and yet—I am flung aside for the sake of a silly doll like you!"

"Again, that touches you! It is the truth that hurts, they say, and I am going to tell you the truth! I am going to show you just why I have taken so much trouble to bring you here, although I have to bare my bosom to your scornful gaze and tear open its wounds afresh!

"You guessed aright. I am Mercedes del Cavillo, and this is my house, built by my fathers, long years before any of your accursed race invaded this country. I curse them ten thousand times over! And still I curse them, though my greatest joy came with one of your people, and with the joy the misery!"

Mercedes poured out more wine and drank it, then tossed back her short locks with a hard, reckless laugh.

"Bah! I do not mean that! I do not suffer! I have no heart to feel pain and regret. I have been first and most precious, for a time. That is enough, is it not?"

Despite her really remarkable nerve, Della Cameron shivered as she listened to this madly reckless speech. There was no acting now in this woman's voice or manner. And reckless though her words were, they betrayed a sorely wounded, intensely-suffering heart.

"I swore never to speak his name before you, and I will keep my vow. If you cannot guess whom I mean, so much the better for you, little one!" with a low, mocking laugh.

"Never mind the past. It is past, and that is enough for me. Whatever else he may take, he cannot rob me of memory! If I lose now, time was when I won, and wore!"

"I can speak boldly, yet without breaking the vow he exacted. You have had many lovers, and it may be of any of these I talk. Whoever it may prove though, do not forget this: he was mine before he was yours; he will be mine again after you are dead and forgotten!"

"If you are a woman, leave me to myself!" panted Della, shrinking away from that baleful gaze.

"I am a woman, therefore I stay!" laughed Mercedes. "I did not think I would let you see all, just now, but since it stings you to the quick I'll drain the cup dry! I'll show you just what is in store for you, as penalty for taking my place, for stepping into my shoes!"

"He came, long ago, this double lover of ours. He came but for a night's shelter, he said, but he stayed much longer. I was glad, for I loved him before I heard him speak twice! You cannot understand such a love, and in your ignorance you are more blessed than poor me!"

"It was love that thought of love only. I was young, and did not know how easily men can break their love-vows, or perhaps I might have been more prudent—that is a lie! True, whole-hearted love knows naught of prudence; and I loved him that way!"

"Well, we were wedded, but there was no holy father near to bless us and to make the bonds more binding; if there had been, perhaps my lover would not have strayed so soon!"

"Never mind that. It is not to you I would complain!" with a hard and bitter laugh.

"After me, you; after you, I will reign again!"

"Kill me, first!" panted Della, almost fiercely.

Mercedes gazed into her pale, agitated face, smiling curiously.

"That would be too soon over, little one! And you would shrink and scream for mercy as the cold steel began to prick your tender flesh! Nor would it all be fear of death! You would think of what you were losing—of his love, rather than life!"

"I know that, from sad experience, you see," with a low, almost sad laugh, then rapidly adding: "It was some such feeling that led me to crush down my mad heart and submit when he came to me and bade me do the work that has ended in bringing you to this place. When he swore that if I refused to aid him, to obey him in every respect, he would go away and never let my eyes rest upon his face again, I yielded, just as you would yield, did you love him as I love!"

"I thought I could do it, and so I told him his will was my law. I listened when he told me all his cunning scheme, and said that I would serve him faithfully; that I would

Rob Roy Ranch.

spring the trap and catch his dainty game for him.

"He was satisfied with my promise, for never yet had I failed him. And when I promised, I thought I would be faithful in spirit as I have been in letter. I thought I could smother my love long enough for that, rather than lose him altogether. But now—I know better! I know that were I to see him in your company, it would kill me—not before my dagger could drink deep of your heart's blood, though!"

There was a savage intensity in her tones, in her face and manner, that plainly proved her sincerity. One hand grasped the haft of her stiletto and partly drew it from her bosom. But Della Cameron did not shrink from the half-threatened blow. Instead, she did not seem to see the action. She leaned forward, her trembling hands outstretched, her eyes filled with an eager, longing glow, her voice unsteady as she said:

"I do not want to see him—I would rather die! Set me free, and I swear to you by all my hopes of heaven that I will never come between him and you! I swear that I will never see him—that I will never betray what you have told me! Only set me free—let me go before he comes! If you are a woman, pity me, and let me go!"

Mercedes laughed shrilly, mercilessly, as the poor girl-wife faltered, choked by her own terrible emotion. She rose from her chair and clapped her brown hands in triumph. She laughed more mercilessly than ever as Della sunk back, shivering, deathlike.

"Is it not true, poor fool, what I said? I am laughing now, as you laughed a bit ago; but my mirth will last the longest. You can pray to me. You, who made such a fool of Mercedes del Cavillo? Good! I thought I would try how I could act—myself! And yet," with a sudden frown and hardening of tones, "it is not all acting, mind you, little one! I have told you the truth so far as it goes, though I am by no means so wretchedly miserable as I led you to think."

"It is true, I loved the man who loves you. It is also true that I love him yet, for such passion as mine dies only when death claims me as well. And it is true that I would rather kill you than stand by to see you languish in his arms. But I am not mad enough to show my hand when I cut short your breath—no!"

"First, there is the ransom-money to think of. That I will shortly receive, if my envoy performs his work as well as he usually does. And when the gold is safe in my hands, your wild-bull of a father can wait for the rest of the compact, until I am prepared to end the farce."

"You will not dare to cheat him!"

"Is it a lack of daring that has marked the movements of Prince Lucifer thus far?" sneeringly retorted Mercedes. "Was it a lack of daring that made my little tricks of last night prove so successful? Was it cowardice that surprised you and your husband at the New Ranch, or a want of daring that gave your father warning of his loss by the blaze of your husband's funeral pyre?"

"If you break faith with him, he will hunt you down to death!"

"On the contrary, he will never utter one word of complaint after I part with him!" laughed Mercedes, with a too plain meaning in her voice—a terrible meaning that caused poor Della to sink back, almost fainting with fear and terror.

"And as for the rest," mercilessly added the woman, gloating over her merciless work, "they may grumble, but you will be beyond hearing them! And when your bold lover comes to see his prize, he will find a loathsome suicide! If not in reality, in seeming."

"You shall have your choice of deaths: by cord, steel, lead or poison. If you are brave enough to do the work yourself, good! If not—I will serve as your deputy, and do the work so deftly that not even the keen eyes of a lover can detect a flaw! When the ransom is secured I will come to you again, and ask your choice. Until then, adieu!"

With a low, merciless laugh, Mercedes turned and left the room.

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW PRINCE LUCIFER KEPT FAITH.

As soon as Dart Malone had ridden away in the growing twilight, John Dement called his men together and briefly informed them of the message sent by Prince Lucifer, and his unqualified acceptance of it.

He bade one of their number carry word to the New Ranch, at which place Fergus Cameron had preferred stopping for the present, and ask the young Scotchman to ride over as soon as he pleased, either that same night, or in the morning.

Fergus Cameron lost no time in responding to that call, and as Melancholy Mike informed Oscar Radford, the meeting was had before the fat cowboy stole away to carry the tidings.

John Dement quickly made known the terms offered, with his prompt acceptance of the same, and Cameron seemed to breathe freely once more. Not that he had doubted the willing-

ness of his father-in-law to pay any reasonable amount for the ransom of his only child, but until now he feared the figures asked would be beyond all reason.

"That was jest what troubled me the wu'st," said Dement, with a grim, hard smile, as the two men sat in the room where Dart Malone had made known the terms of ransom. "When the imps talked of axin' Dell's weight in gold fer lettin' her go free, it hit me mighty hard, fer somehow I got it mixed up with a chunk o' solid gold that hed to be the same bigness o' the little gal, don't ye see?"

"Well, the mistako was not so unnatural, after all," laughed Fergus Cameron, "and our ideas come much closer to the real value of our pet than those of that scarlet demon!"

"But we ain't kickin' too hard at his under-valuin' her, lad!" with a grim copy of that laugh. "Not until we've paid the price an' got her safe in our own hands ag'in!"

Fergus Cameron was grave enough now, for the most critical. His bows were gathered together, his blue eyes filled with an uneasy, restless light.

"I don't like that stipulation about your taking the money to meet that infernal rascal alone, though! It sounds too much like a trap of some sort. I wouldn't have consented to it, had I been here."

"I don't know as you'd hev hed anythin' to say about it," bluntly retorted the rancher. "The word was sent to me. I'm payin' the money, an' it's fer my gal that I'm payin' of it."

"She is my wife."

"An' you couldn't keep her one night!"

"Did you send for me to quarrel with me, Mr. Dement?" sharply demanded Cameron, turning very pale as he rose to his feet.

"Set down ag'in, boy, an' don't be a fool," bluntly retorted John Dement, though with much more of cordiality in his tones than the words would seem to indicate. "I don't mean to quarrel with you, nur yit to hint that you wasn't as keeful as you should be, last night. But I do say that I've tuck the reins out o' your hands fer this trip, an' you ain't nobody but a passenger."

If Fergus Cameron was not convinced, he was silenced. After all, what mattered the leadership so long as Della was rescued?

They sat up until a late hour, discussing the case in all its bearings, both growing more and more hopeful the longer they talked.

Enormous as it sounded at first, the ransom was comparatively moderate as computed by the messenger sent by Prince Lucifer. John Dement had nearly that amount in ready cash close at hand, and his efforts among his neighbors had brought him double as much more, leaving out the package brought from the Radford Ranch.

"The boy Cain't be the black devil you tried to make out, Cameron," Dement said, gravely. "He sent mo a pile o' cash, with his title deeds an' a bill o' sale that kivers every hoof an' horn on the place, jest as he swore he would when he bluffed us off this mornin'. I Cain't make it come true that he's sech a devilish double-dealer!"

"You shall not use one dollar of his money to pay for the freedom of my wife!" sharply exclaimed Cameron, his brows growing very dark.

"Nur I don't mean to, sence I've got enough without. Ef I didn't hev, it'd take more than your say so to hender me, though!" was the grim response. "She's fu'st, last, everythin' to me, is Dell, an' I'd take money red-hot from the claws o' Satan ef I couldn't make out without it."

Fergus Cameron somehow appeared to have lost his usual knack of getting along smoothly with all beings, since Prince Lucifer began to mix in with his affairs. He had not figured over and above creditably in any of the curious events which have found a record here, however true and manly his intentions. Even now he could hardly keep from a quarrel with his father-in-law.

One reason, he could not bring himself to approve of the bargain made with Prince Lucifer in all its parts. He seemed to feel that under that proposition lay something to be dreaded, something foul and treacherous, which was fated to ruin their dearest hopes. But the more he hinted at this, the more obstinately John Dement clung to his pledge as given the outlaw's envoy.

"That was what he stuck out fer, an' that was what I promised, when I see that we couldn't come to no 'greement without it," he muttered, doggedly. "I promised, an' I'll keep my word. I know the lay o' the ground too well to run my head into any trap."

"But if he takes the money and then refuses to set Della free?"

"Time enough to think what when he does it."

And with this Fergus Cameron was forced to content himself.

It was a long and feverish day the next. John Dement was resolved to live up to his agreement to the very letter, as well as spirit, and stubbornly refused to move before noon.

"We kin kiver the ground in two hours, an' the time set was fer 'bout five. It's easier wait-

in' here then it would be out yester, eatin' our hearts out with impatience. Simmer down, lad, simmer down!"

And thus it was near the middle of the afternoon before John Dement swung himself into the saddle and rode briskly away from the ranch, to keep his appointment with Prince Lucifer.

By his side rode Fergus Cameron, and at their heels came a full score of stout cowboys, for the owner of Rob Roy Ranch had sent word to New Ranch for Cinnamon Green and his mates to attend him. John Dement smiled grimly as he caught sight of the burly cowboy whose face was painted with half the colors of the rainbow, but he made no remarks.

Although he anticipated no occasion for force, he picked an equal number from his own employees, bidding them look well to their rifles and cartridge belts. He made them understand that they were to take no decided action without the orders of Fergus Cameron, under whose charge he would leave them when the edge of Split Rock plain was reached. And in their hearing he just as plainly cautioned Cameron against making a move without Prince Lucifer openly attempted to play him false.

John Dement timed his progress by the sun, rather than his own sternly repressed impatience, and it was close upon the designated hour when he drew rein with his men at the lower edge of the plain where he was to meet Prince Lucifer.

"You kin see all that happens from here, without showin' yourselves plain enough to skeer the pizen imp," he said, drawing rein, casting a long, searching glance ahead of them. "You know what the 'greement is: I'm to go alone. I ain't to hev anybody with nur yit follerin' me. You don't want to fergit this, Cameron," with a slight frown. "I'm workin' fer Dell, now, an' ef I was to see you puttin' her in danger, I'd send a blue whistler through your brain too quickl!"

Cameron bit his lips, but made no reply. John Dement rarely stopped to pick or choose his words, and an expostulation such as leaped to the tip of his tongue would only consume more precious minutes.

"I will remember, sir," he simply said. "If she is your daughter, she is also my wife!"

"Which is one reason why you want to walk mighty straight," was the blunt retort. "They ain't goin' to be no more botch-work 'bout this afa'r, ef I kin help it!"

With the ransom done up in a neat package and concealed in his bosom, for it had been made up of bank-notes as the more easily transported, John Dement rode away from the little band of watchful, suspicious men, facing directly north, toward the Split Rock.

The position of the sun told him that he had arrived in good time, without being too impatient, and as he rode deliberately along, his keen eyes kept roving from point to point in eager anticipation of sighting Prince Lucifer.

"He'll come—he's got to come!" he muttered, as he covered at least a mile without making any discovery. "They ain't no reason why he shouldn't. I 'greed to everythin' he said, 'cept it was the ridin' all the way plum' alone. An' that he wouldn't kick ag'in, unless he meant to play double, as the lad hints at! He'll come—an' thar he is now!"

The final exclamation broke sharply from his lips as he caught sight of a human figure abruptly risen into full view, though nearly quarter of a mile away, and a little to the left of his present position.

Instinctively he drew rein, gazing eagerly beneath his curving palm, for the rays of the sinking sun shone full in his face.

He only saw a human torso at first, but then, as though rising a hidden swell, or issuing from a depression of some sort, he caught sight of a horse as well.

"He's bin hidin' in the coulee!" muttered John Dement, a grim smile curling his lips as he moved toward the horseman. "He wanted to make sure I wasn't playin' no tricks, I reckon!"

As he gave his good horse free rein, John Dement held up both hands, empty and open-palmed toward the horseman, keenly watching the result. It was satisfactory, for in answer came a wave of a plumed hat as the rider advanced to meet the rancher.

Despite the rays of the bright sun, John Dement could make out a trim, neat figure only half-hidden by the long black cloak that floated open in the breeze born of that movement. As he drew nearer, he saw a belt of weapons about the waist, and that a black mask concealed the face of the outlaw.

"Welcome, John Dement!" cried the masked rider as he drew rein when a few yards away. "You are promptly on time, I see!"

"Ef you're as good a business man, I reckon it won't take long fer us to git through with this job," bluntly returned the rancher, gazing keenly at the mask, though he could see not a single eye that glowed and sparkled through the holes in the silken covering.

They were eyes which he believed he had gazed into many and many a time! That was a voice which he had heard times without number!

"You have brought the ducats with you, then?" quickly asked the masked outlaw, leaning forward a little as he spoke.

"Wait a bit, critter," slowly uttered Dement, still trying to read the truth in those glowing orbs. "Ef I do my part, you'll do yours?"

"Of course!" was the impatient retort.

"That's what I want to talk over a bit, you see. That critter you sent to me, didn't say any too much on that p'int. He jest said that when the money was paid, my little gal would be set free."

"After the ransom was received, I told him," bowed Prince Lucifer.

"But how long after?" persisted Dement, gravely, anxiously. "Why ain't she here fer to go with me right now? Why ain't you willin' to give her to me when I give you the money? That's what bothers me the wu'st! It looks like you was playin' tricky!"

Prince Lucifer laughed softly, musically.

"It is for me to dictate and you to submit to my terms, thankful that I offer any at all, my dear fellow!"

"I'm ready to pay you the price you ax, without a growl, but I want to know that it'll fetch me my gal ag'in," gravely uttered the rancher. "I want to know when she'll come back, an' how!"

"Just as soon as I feel safe in sending her back," was the prompt response. "Just as soon as I am convinced you have no spies out to dog me to my den, in hopes of getting back your money with my life by way of interest to the loan. She would be safe in your arms this very moment, had you accepted the proposal as made by my envoy; had you come to meet me alone and unguarded!"

"Why didn't he say so, then?"

"Simply because he had no such orders. I wished to try you, and I would not give him a chance to put you on your guard. Still, I am telling you no more than the simple truth. If you had not been so suspicious, I would have felt you meant nothing but plain business. Since you insisted on bringing an armed escort with you, I resolved to run no more risks than I was compelled to in order to secure the ransom."

"You preferred your own fashion. All right. I will live up to the letter of my offer. Pay me the money, and you can return home, there to await the coming of your daughter."

"It's mighty hard lines you're drawin', critter!" growled Dement.

"If you find them too hard, you can decline them," was the cold retort. "Keep your money, and I'll keep your daughter."

"Swear that you'll send her safely home, an'—"

"Not another word!" sternly. "Pay the money, or refuse, at once!"

"Thar's the money, but ef you are playin' a double game on me, it won't benefit you much in the end!" sternly cried the rancher, taking the package from his breast and passing it over to the outlaw. "Count it over an' see it's all right."

"I am satisfied to take your word for it!" with a light laugh. "You would not dare to trick me, knowing that your child is still under my thumb."

"Nur I won't give you a chance to say that I've played you dirt, muther!" doggedly uttered the rancher. "On the paper an' count it over afore my eyes. When you say it's all right, then—"

"Do you dare attempt to dictate, you dog?" grated Prince Lucifer, swiftly withdrawing his hand from his bosom, into which he had thrust the flat package of money.

That same hand now grasped a double-acting revolver, and before John Dement could lift a hand to defend himself—before he could even divine his danger—two bullets sped from the glittering weapon and pierced his broad bosom!

A horrible cry of pain and rage broke from his lips. He flung up his hands, his fingers convulsively tearing at his breast, where the hot life-blood was streaming over his garments. He reeled like a drunken man in the saddle, then as his frightened horse leaped aside, he toppled over and fell headlong to the ground!

And Prince Lucifer, checking his own startled steed, leaned over in the saddle, sending bullet after bullet into the quivering body!

More than a mile away the cowboys under lead of Fergus Cameron were watching the meeting, though their unaided eyes could make out few of the details as recorded here. But then a wild cry of angry horror burst from their lips as one man. They saw Prince Lucifer make his murderous assault, and saw John Dement fall to the ground.

"Follow me, lads!" cried Fergus Cameron, plunging spurs to his good steed's flanks and dashing out upon the plain. "I feared it! I warned him time and time again, but he would not heed!"

"The bloody devil's murderin' the boss, an' him down on his back!" savagely grated John Dumpling, his gaunt face fairly livid with rage and longing for vengeance. "Ef we kin only ketch him up! Ef we only kin run him down!"

"We will, unless he's actually the devil men

call him!" grated Fergus Cameron, looking to his weapons.

They could see Prince Lucifer leap to the ground and bend over the body of his victim as though making sure he was finished. And in wild hopes that he might not hear or see them until flight would be fruitless, the avengers sped on at top speed, choking down their savage oaths and cries for vengeance.

It seemed as though their hopes were to be gratified, for more than two-thirds of the distance was covered before Prince Lucifer gave sign of taking alarm. But then he leaped into the saddle and swung his plumed hat above his head, uttering a taunting yell of defiance.

That let loose the pent-up cries, and the heavens resounded with the mad yells and curses of the cowboys as they plied whip and spur in their mad race. They had thoughts only for vengeance. They gave no thought to a possible ambush, until Prince Lucifer, just beyond the coulee, drew rein and faced them, bringing a rifle up to his face.

"Back! you bloodhounds!" came his clear, menacing voice.

"Drop him with a snap-shot, if you can!" cried Cameron, wrenching up his horse and hastily lifting his repeating-rifle as though in hopes of putting his words into execution.

A spout of blue smoke came from the leveled rifle of the outlaw just as Cameron fired, and a sharp cry broke from the cowboy leader as his horse plunged forward shot through the brain.

"The boss is down, but we'll look to him!" cried Cinnamon Green, hastily adding: "Ride over the pizen critter, you!"

With savage cheers, the cowboys from the Dement Ranch dashed on, firing as they raced. But Prince Lucifer made no effort to resume his flight, though they were half a score in all. He stood his ground and sent a stream of lead from his repeating-rifle with a speed and accuracy that was fairly marvelous. Man and horse went down with cries and groans and agonized neighing.

And then, to cap the climax, up from the tall grass in the bottom of the coulee rose a strong force of armed men, opening a deadly fire upon the survivors. It was too much for mortal man to face, and with more than two-thirds of their number dead or crippled, the cowboys turned and fled to join their mates near the spot where Dement and Cameron had fallen.

"Save them, pard's!" grated John Dumpling, himself bleeding from more than one severe wound. "Four tote them, while the rest stand the bloody imps off! Save them both! I'll shoot the man that tries to dodge it!"

And as the Night-Imps, led by Prince Lucifer in person, came down in a fierce charge, the cowboys sullenly retreated, firing as they went, bearing their fallen chiefs with them.

CHAPTER XVII.

A DOUBLE CAPTURE.

LYING in their place of hiding, Oscar Radford and Melancholy Mike watched the meeting of John Dement with Prince Lucifer.

They were too far away from the place of meeting to hear the words which passed between the men, or even to readily interpret their gestures; but their ambush had been placed only after considerable thought and consideration.

From thence they could overlook the entire plain toward the south. No one could enter or leave it—at least, so they believed until Prince Lucifer gave a glimpse of himself near the head of the coulee—without being observed. They had secure cover for their horses hard by, so that a few moments would put them in the saddle if necessary.

"I surely thought they would be closer than this!" muttered Radford, with a frown of disappointment as Prince Lucifer rose from his place of concealment and John Dement turned to meet him. "I thought the rascal would come from this cover, where we might manage to creep near enough to get the drop on him!"

"Waal, we kin see which way he goes, an' I'mbettin' big money ef I once hit off his trail, he don't throw me over afore I fetch him back to Limerick!"

Still, the distance was not so great but that the twain could watch the meeting with their naked eyes, and with almost breathless interest they did so. They saw the package handed to Prince Lucifer by John Dement, and drew a long breath of relief; for until then they could not bring themselves to believe that the programme would be carried out without some serious hitch.

But that breath was yet warm upon their lips when sharp, horrified cries broke simultaneously from their lungs as they saw Prince Lucifer make his murderous assault upon the old rancher.

"I knew it!" grated Melancholy Mike, springing to his feet and forgetting all else in his mad wish to avenge his master. "Hell's blackest cusses on—"

Oscar Radford caught the fat cowboy by the ankle as he tried to pass, with a deft jerk tripping him flat to the ground. Then, with one hand gripping his arm, with the other shaking a bared blade before his bulging eyes, the young rancher grated hurriedly:

"Would you ruin our last hope? Would you doom her to worse than death? Lie still, or I'll let your mad blood out with this knife!"

"The boss! He's bein' bloody murdered!"

"He's beyond our aid, and must live or die without our mixing in," was the stern reply. "Do our best we couldn't get there in time to save him, or—"

"We mought skeer that devil off!"

"And ruin our hopes of tracking him to his den! I'd do much for the sake of John Dement, but I'm thinking of his daughter, now! Her only chance of escape from worse than death lies with us now!"

With a groan of curiously mingled emotions—fury, hatred, hope, despair and suspicion—Melancholy Mike ceased his struggles long enough to twist his head and gaze out toward the scene of murder.

The rapid roll of firearms had ceased, and that told him all was over. He saw Prince Lucifer just dismounting to inspect his victim, and a groan mingled with a curse as he knew that the worst had come.

"He's down fer good!" he panted, hoarsely, turning with a savage scowl upon the young rancher, whose face was pale as that of a corpse, but whose jaws were firmly set. "I might 'a' saved his life, but you wouldn't let me. I won't fergit it soon, nur that ef I hedn't run it atween you an' the rope yeestday you wouldn't—"

"Be here to help you avenge John Dement!" sharply interrupted Radford. "Look at it in the right light, Mike, and you can't help seeing I acted all for the best. That—ha!" with a sharp, almost hissing breath, as his gaze turned from the assassin and his victim over the plain to where Fergus Cameron was leading his cowboys on that mad, ill-fated charge.

"The boys are coming, Mike!" he added, after one swift look, relaxing his firm grip and permitting the fat cowboy to go free. "It may be that they'll drive the demon this way! If so, see which one of us will do more to avenge John Dement!"

Though no longer held captive, Melancholy Mike made no effort to break away. He felt that his master was dead, beyond any aid from his hands. And the hope of seeing the murderer ridden down by the fiercely-charging cowboys, or else driven back to cover, where he might be killed or captured by themselves, held his mad hatred in check and kept him upon his knees behind the friendly bushes.

"He don't see nur hear. They'll climb all over the durned imp afore he knows—Hell an' blazes!" with a savage snarl as Prince Lucifer turned and leaped into the saddle with a defiant wave of his black-plumed hat. "He ain't runnin' away! That's a trap somers, an' the boys is too durned mad fer to see what it all means! Back, you fool critters!" and springing to his feet, Melancholy Mike swung his arms about frantically, shouting out his warning.

With something very like an oath, Oscar Radford caught Mike about the waist, tripping him up and falling heavily upon him, holding him helpless while he snarled:

"Try any more fool tricks, and I'll slit your infernal throat! Do you want to ruin our only chance of saving Della? Look on, if you like, but my gun is at your ear, and at the first bowl I'll empty your skull as sure as the heavens are above us!"

Melancholy Mike was too excited to take offense at either this harsh threat or his harsher treatment. He lifted his head and glared out at the thrilling scene.

"I knew it!" he gasped, pointing with quivering hand to the tall grass in the coulee. "Thar the imps be! The boys'll git little ole hell in a holy minnit!"

"Look at Cameron!" hoarsely muttered Radford, his dark eyes glowing like balls of fire. "Cowed, by the eternal gods!"

"The clumsy critter!" spluttered Mike, as he saw the Scotchman fall heavily with his horse. "He shot his hoss by accident!"

"You saw it?" eagerly demanded Radford. "You saw him shoot down his own horse? And see!" with increasing excitement, as the cowboys under Cinnamon Green checked their animals and permitted the men from the Dement Ranch to continue the charge alone. "By the heavens above! I didn't think even he would show such open treachery!"

"I knew it!" muttered Melancholy Mike, half wild with mingled grief and rage as he watched the thrilling drama in which he was powerless to take a part. "Thar it comes!"

It was soon over. The ambush was sprung with fatal effect, and the survivors retreated in hot haste, though they stopped long enough to pick up and carry off the bodies of John Dement and Fergus Cameron.

The Night-Imps of the Pan-handle followed, firing rapidly and sending forth yells of wildest exultation, while the defeated cowboys kept up a tolerably steady fire in response, covering the flight of those who carried the fallen leaders.

Then Prince Lucifer, who had not joined in the charge, uttered a clear, shrill yell that instantly checked his Imps. They sent one more volley after their enemies, then wheeled and galloped back to their masked chief.

Melancholy Mike drew a long breath, and sunk back upon his hams, brushing the great drops from his brow, muttering hoarsely:

"The Imps hed 'em foul, but they opened their grip an' let 'em go! It's bad enough, but it mought 'a' bin heap wuss, ef they'd said so!"

A short, hard laugh from Oscar Radford startled him, and turning his head Mike saw a sneering smile upon that handsome face.

"Shall I tell you why, Mike?" the young rancher said, his tones as unpleasant as his smile. "Because Fergus Cameron was in the party, and it wouldn't answer to make him run too great a risk from stray lead! Because it is hardly worth while to chase only three men!"

"Thar's a good dozen yit!"

"But only three to kill, without hurting their own gang, Mike!"

Melancholy Mike, usually clear witted and keen enough, scratched his head with a sorely puzzled air. He could not understand just what his companion was trying to insinuate.

"Still blind?" with another of those short, disagreeable laughs. "Well, think it all over, and I'll try to clear out the tangles which prove too much for you, lad! Just now—we've other work on hand."

The Night-Imps had obeyed their chief, and were seemingly listening to his instructions, near the head of the *coulee*. Of course what passed between them could only be guessed at by the two men in hiding near the Split Rock, but was not difficult for them to guess at the context.

"The rascals are left to watch that none of the boys takes a notion to dog them. The head devil is off, to put his blood-money in safety, and to finish up his part of the dirty business!" muttered Radford, seemingly more to himself than for the benefit of his mate.

"We kin cut arround an' ketch the critter, mebbe!" suggested Mike.

"The ground is too open for that. The risk would be too great."

"We ain't to stop here, like bumps on a log, an' let 'em git cl'ar off!" indignantly ejaculated Melancholy Mike. "Be durned if you don't talk an' act like you wanted him to git away!"

"And you are acting more like a hot-headed greenhorn than the cool, clear-witted fellow I've always believed you, Mike," was the cool retort. "Don't make me regret having brought you along! Don't make me sorry for having held my hand a bit ago when you tried your level best to ruin all our hopes of getting Miss Della safe out of this hobble!"

While uttering these words Oscar Radford was following the movement of Prince Lucifer through his field-glass. Though the sun had dropped below the western hills, there was still sufficient light for this, and would be for at least another hour.

The chief of the Night-Imps was riding away at a rapid pace, heading almost due northwest from the *coulee*, seemingly bound on important business.

Melancholy Mike, anything but satisfied, was gazing moodily, suspiciously into the dark countenance of the young rancher. It seemed strange to him why Radford had hindered him in rushing out to save or avenge John Dement. It seemed still stranger that he should have held him powerless when a single clear shout might have saved the cowboys from rushing headlong upon death.

Had he been deceived, after all? Was Radford really connected with the Night-Imps, as Cameron had so positively declared?

"I've got the right point marked down, and we'll take his trail from there!" muttered Radford, at length lowering the glass, and wiping his strained eyes. "We can make a circle and hit it off easy enough, and those rascals down there can't see or suspect any mischief, if we work it right."

He looked into the face of his companion and plainly read the dark suspicions there. A slight frown passed over his face, but it lasted only an instant. Then, with a low, mellow laugh, he spoke:

"Mike, you're going back on me? Not without letting me explain away your doubts, I hope?"

"Ef you kin do that, boss, I'll git down on my two knees to ye, an' say double-thank'e in the barg'in!" impulsively cried the fat cowboy.

"Stiddy by jerks, you durn critter! I don't like to make a hangin'-post out o' myself, but ef you turn too mighty contrary, I'll turn tail to ye an' haul the rope over my shoulder onto you'll take oath you're playin' plummet to the finest gallows in the hull Pan-handle."

There was no answer, and for a very good reason.

With a handful of tightly twisted grass thrust into his mouth, and a well-greased noose closing about his throat, the slack gathered in the stout fingers of Melancholy Mike, the little, dried-up-looking Mexican was hardly in condition for free speech.

"It's the fu'st time I ever tried my han' at monkey-robin', boss, but I made the rifle, fu'st clatter!" grinned the fat cowboy as he came to a halt before a slender, yet muscular figure

which suddenly uprose before captor and captive, from a little clump of bushes.

"No name, pard!" warily muttered the man addressed, whose face was hidden from view by a silk handkerchief passing across it, the ends being knotted behind his neck, and a slit cut in front for eyesight.

"All right, boss," was the brisk response, as Melancholy Mike deftly tripped his captive by kicking his feet from beneath him. "I'd hide my mug, too, ef it wasn't so pritty it'd burn a hole through the kiverin' faster than you could putt 'em on! Quit your kickin', you shriveled-up monkey! I ain't goin' to eat ye, ef I be mighty nigh starved!"

"Don't misuse him more than you can help, Mike," said Oscar Radford, in clear tones, as he stood looking on. "Time enough to use harsh measures when milder ones fail to make him act reasonable!"

Instantly the little old Mexican ceased his wild struggles to escape. His black, snake-like eyes, glared up at the speaker, and as though cowed by those cold, clear tones, he immediately calmed down.

"That's heap more like it, critter," grinned Melancholy Mike, as he turned his captive over on his face and drew his hands behind his back, deftly securing them with a couple of turns of rope, the remainder of which was then wound around his body, to be knotted firmly at his ankles. "Ef you cain't be easy, be as easy as ye kin!"

"Set his jaws at liberty, Mike," added Radford, drawing nearer as the captive was propped in a sitting posture, with his back supported by a convenient rock. "He'll need the use of them, you know."

"An' ef they don't wag mighty free, I'm the critter as knows how to 'ilo 'em up, too!" chuckled Mike, doing as bidden.

"There is no need," huskily muttered the Mexican, with another swift glance up and down that lithe, trim figure. "I will talk. Why not speak, since the senor ask it of me? Who am I to hold out against him? A dog—a coyote!"

There was something peculiar in the look and the words. Melancholy Mike grew suddenly grave, glancing dubiously from one to the other, as though his recently lulled suspicions were being awakened once more.

He had listened to the explanations given by Oscar Radford, as the twain lay in hiding, waiting for the long night to pass away that they might strike the trail of Prince Lucifer and dog him to his retreat. One by one the young rancher cleared up the points which looked strange or suspicious to the fat cowboy. He told him just why he suspected Fergus Cameron of being a secret ally of Prince Lucifer, if not the actual chief himself. And so well was all this done, that Melancholy Mike felt himself a fool for even doubting his companion.

Together they watched until the Night-Imps, satisfied that no attempt would be made to follow their chief, mounted and rode rapidly away from the scene of the massacre, scattering the better to break their trail. And together, with the first light of dawn, they struck the tracks of the masked assassin at the point marked by Radford, following it through all its windings, despite the evident attempts to break the trail, until it brought them in sight of the Rancho del Cavillo. And the same belief appeared to attack them at the same moment. They both in a breath declared that their prey was run to earth at last!

They played their part well, creeping and hiding, scouting nearly all around the lone ranch, without being discovered; and then, well along in the afternoon, the chance for which they watched and prayed, came to them.

An old, dried-up Mexican left the ranch and wandered into the broken ground, where he was intercepted by Melancholy Mike, and secured with a lasso. He fought wildly, viciously, and slight though he was in build, Melancholy Mike had no sinecure in bringing him safely to the rendezvous. But now a single word from Oscar Radford seemed enough to tame the human wildcat. In him he appeared to recognize a master. It even looked as though he recognized one who had power and the right to command his services!

"Ef I didn't know it was a lie, durned ef I wouldn't 'most b'lieve the critter tuck you fer the head devil hisself!" muttered Mike.

The black eyes glittered vividly, and there was a poorly hidden menace in the voice that gratingly uttered:

"Still a doubter? This is growing unbearable, Mike! If you can't trust me, the sooner we part company the better!"

"I ain't doubtin', Boss, but durned ef it ain't mighty queer, anyhow!"

Radford laughed shortly, sneeringly:

"Well, suppose the old fool does mistake? He'll need less persuasion to let out what we want to know, won't he?"

"Never thought o' that!" ejaculated Melancholy Mike, brightening up at the suggestion.

"Your name, my fine fellow?" demanded Radford, turning again to the captive, his voice hard and stern.

"Old Antone, senor."

"You belong to yonder ranch, of course?"

"Yes, senor."

"Then you are just the man we've been looking for! Tell me how many men there are in the ranch; the number or women; the secret words, if any, which one must use to gain admittance."

"Seven men, four women, with the senorita. You need no passwords, senor, for those on guard will not question you!"

"What do you mean by that?" with increased harshness. "Why are there guards, if a stranger can pass them by without challenge?"

"Nothing, senor," meekly. "Only they will not take you for a stranger, you look so much like Don Enrique!"

"Who the foul fiend is Don Enrique?"

"Don Enrique Cristoval, senor, the right-hand man of the senorita: the one who wears the scarlet mask when the senorita does not feel like taking the road."

"And you think I could pass for this Henry Christopher, as long as I kept my face covered over?" asked Oscar Radford, his voice showing traces of growing emotion.

"Masked or unmasked, I should say, senor," with a grim smile.

With a quick motion Radford tore off the disarming silk, crying:

"Do you say so still, you rascal?"

"Is it the truth you want, senor?" meekly asked the captive.

"Of course the truth! And beware how you answer! If you say I can pass for this Henry Cristoval, or Christopher, and I get into trouble by acting on your declaration, you die a thousand deaths in one!"

"I hear, and understand, senor," was the cool response. "You have a face so like that of Don Enrique, that even Senorita Mercedes would never discover the difference. Face, figure, voice—all the same!"

"So much the worse for him, and better for me, then!" laughed Radford, seemingly greatly relieved. "Now tell me: is the young American lady still in the ranch?"

"She is, senor."

"Describe the room she is confined in. Make no mistakes, or you sup sorrow for your stupidity."

Old Antone briefly but clearly gave the desired information, and as though satisfied, Oscar Radford turned to one side, motioning Melancholy Mike to follow him.

"Mike, you will take this rascal and carry him to my ranch. Lose no time on the road, but leave him safe there, and bring back my boys, prepared for hot work. Unless this rascal lies, we've got the game in our own hands, now!"

"Then you won't—you ain't goin' to risk gettin' inside?"

"Alone? On his say-so?" with a short laugh. "Not unless I can first get a glimpse of this wonderful Henry Christopher whose face, voice and figure so marvelously resemble mine! Bah!" flinging out one hand in a gesture of contempt. "Did you swallow all that, Mike?"

"It come mighty nigh chokin' me, but durned ef I didn't gulp it all down, boss!" with a half-sleepish grin.

"And come nearly as close to thinking me the rascal that old man tried to hint, too! Mike, you're but a fair-weather friend, at best! No, you needn't waste words in trying to get out of it. I'm not mortally offended, and you can put in your time to better advantage. Take that rascal and don't let the grass grow under your feet between here and the ranch. Tell my boys just what is in the wind, but don't let it out to another soul! And whatever else you are guilty of, don't let Fergus Cameron get his hands on you, or smoke what you and I know! If you do—well, I pity your poor mistress! She'll never be set free, then!"

"I'll blow him to thunder ef I cain't git shot of him no easier way, boss!" declared Mike, with a scowl of grim resolution.

Oscar Radford hurried him up, and helped to bind Old Antone in the saddle of the horse he himself had ridden to that cover. And with a hard, grim smile Oscar Radford stood watching the rapidly retreating figures until they disappeared from sight.

"A gay couple—and it would be hard to pick out the biggest fool of the two! If he only knew—hal!" with a hard laugh and a mocking shrug of the shoulders. "In time he'll know what a mistake he has made; but not until everlasting too late!"

With a swift, unhesitating step the young rancher strode away in the direction of the Rancho del Cavillo, seemingly forgetting the half-pledge he had given Melancholy Mike. He passed directly up to the massive gates that closed the arched passage leading to the house, but though he could see no one, it was evident that the guard were on the alert, for before he quite gained the iron-studded gate, or double doors, they swung open to admit him.

Two armed men stood inside the arch, but Oscar Radford hardly gave them a glance as he passed them by, his brows dark and stern. Nor did either of the men venture to address him.

He passed across the court, and entered a

door, pausing for a moment to glance about him, as though to decide just what move to make next. Only for a moment, however. Even as he stood there, he caught the faint sound of voices coming from beyond a door to his right, and advancing, he bent his ear in breathless listening.

His face turned white as he listened, and a vivid light flashed into his eyes as he grasped the handle and flung the door wide open, striding across the threshold, taking in the scene with one glance.

Della Cameron seated in a chair, cowering before Mercedes del Cavillo, who turned with a sharp exclamation of anger and surprise as the door opened.

"Silence!" sternly cried Radford, closing the heavy door behind him as he lifted one hand in warning. "Attempt to raise an alarm and I'll kill you, woman though you are in seeming! Miss Dement—Della!"

"You—how dare you intrude here without permission?" sternly cried Mercedes, springing between them, one hand flashing a dagger in view. "Back! Oscar Radford! How dare you break our sacred compact!"

The young rancher seemed taken aback by this fierce address, and hesitated, one hand dropping toward his waist as though in quest of a weapon. Mercedes del Cavillo saw the action and stamped sharply with her slipped foot upon the floor as with anger, adding sternly:

"Once more, Oscar Radford, how dare you come here before I have granted permission? Go—unless you wish me to break my part of the compact, even as you have broken yours. Go! or I summon help to—"

A faint cry escaped the lips of startled, bewildered Della, but it came too late to warn the young rancher. She saw a trap-door raised in the ceiling above his head, and a noose drop down, to encircle and close tightly about his neck.

"Pull—pull hard, my gallant men!" cried Mercedes del Cavillo, with a shrill, mocking laugh as she sprung forward.

Right well was she obeyed!

The noose tightened about the throat of Oscar Radford. He staggered, seeming about to grasp at the noose, when Mercedes sprung upon him, clasping her arms tightly about his arms and body, clinging to him despite his struggles.

And thus they were drawn up through the trap above!

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CAMERON TO THE RESCUE.

HORROR-STRICKEN, helpless, unable to lift a hand or even to scream for aid or mercy, Della Cameron witnessed that frightful scene—saw the man she loved hauled struggling into the air, with that pantherish woman clinging around his body, hampering his arms so effectually that Oscar Radford was unable to catch the rope to free his neck of that dislocating strain!

Saw him hauled up to the ceiling and dragged by strong hands through the opening; saw the covering fall again, and then, dimly hearing sounds as of scuffling, of heavy feet trampling, of foul murder, she gave a gasping cry of hopeless despair, and lay like one dead!

For how long this swoon lasted, she could never have told. She was dimly conscious of a sharp shock, of a suffocating sensation, and then awoke, to find herself wet with cold water, to behold Mercedes del Cavillo standing before her, now dressed in the garb most suitable for her sex.

"After all, little one, your veins are filled with milk and water, instead of the pure blood I first thought!" the Spanish woman cried, her red lips curling with scorn, her beautiful face filled with hatred and contempt. "It was worth fighting you, at first, but now—pah! It is like striking a silly child, an idiot!"

"You murdered him!" panted Della, shivering with mingled anger and fear as she shrank deeper into her seat.

Mercedes del Cavillo broke into a low, mocking laugh, then cried:

"And you, the keen-eyed, the solver of tricks and riddles! You were fooled, after all? You took it for real, just as he wished? I almost believe you did, after all!"

Her great black eyes opened wider with wonder, and she gazed into her captive's face like one trying hard to solve a puzzling question. She moved closer, still with that curiously intent gaze.

Della shivered more visibly, a hunted look in her eyes. She tried hard to regain her old courage, but she had undergone too much. Her strength was shattered, her nerves failing. She felt that if this horrible captivity with all its trials were to last much longer, her poor brain must soon give way!

"It is true, then?" and a softer note came into the voice of the Spanish woman as she gazed keenly into that pale, pain-lined face. "You are so silly as to believe it all? You think it was real? That your old lover came here to rescue you, alone and unaided? That in trying to rescue you, he met a horrible death by the rope? It is this you think, poor, silly, witless child?"

A low, mocking laugh parted her red lips, and

she sank back into a chair between her captive and the door. Then, her laugh ceased. Her dark face grew grave and pitiless as she spoke rapidly:

"It was so he wished it—this lover of yours. It was so he planned it all, this wonderful hero—not of yours, but of mine! Mine for years past, mine now, mine to be forevermore, while life lasts!"

"There is no need for wearing the mask longer, and I strip it off—see!" with a passionate gesture as though tearing a covering from her face and hurling it far away. "It is true that Oscar Radford is the real Prince Lucifer, though I have worn the disguise, though others have worn it, too, the more certainly to cover up his trail. It is true that Oscar Radford captured you last night, bringing you here and putting you under my charge. It is true he told me unless I served him in this time of need, he would go away and never again permit me to look into his eyes, to touch his lips, to feel his warm caresses in turn!"

"I loved him, with a love such as poor milk-and-water creatures can little appreciate, and so I consented. With my lips, yes. With my heart, no! ten thousand times over no!"

"He said you were soft enough to worship the hero in man, and to the more surely win your love back again, he would perform marvels of daring, of audacity, of nerve. He would have many frightful adventures and hair-breadth escapes—see?"

"This was one of them. You thought it natural, but after all it is so easy explained away, the solution is so simple—so simple that I will not trouble to put it into words!" with a sudden frown of impatience. "It wastes time, and you have very little of that left, now!"

She rose from the chair, moving toward the table where lay a small package. She picked this up and tore off the wrapper, revealing a vial filled with a colorless liquid.

"It is time, little one! Oscar Radford will never see you again save as the corpse of a suicide! If you wish, I will tell him that you cared not to live longer, thinking him dead, hanged for your sweet sake! He will never know different. He will believe me when I swear that I had no part or lot in your untimely taking off!"

"Come—which is it to be?" with her mocking tones changing to hard, pitiless resolve, her black eyes glowing, her beautiful face looking almost repulsive with the evil passions written thereon. "Die you must. By your own hand, or by mine. By poison, quick and painless, or by the steel. Unless you would prefer the pistol?"

"Give me the pistol!" cried Della, with a sudden return to life and energy, twin spots of hectic color marking her cheeks. "I would rather do the deed myself than to have your evil hands touch me!"

Mercedes del Cavillo drew a silver-plated revolver from her dress and half extended it to the captive, but hesitated, her dark brow contracting as with a sudden suspicion. She drew back as Della Cameron half rose from her chair, saying sharply:

"You are too eager, little one! It is not suicide that lights up those eyes, but a thirst for revenge! You would kill me, first? Is it not so? You would thus avenge your lover? You would—"

So excited had she grown, that the unusual sounds without the room failed to attract her attention, and it was only when the sharp report of firearms, mingling with loud cheers and agonized yells, came distinctly through the heavy door and walls, that she turned with paling face.

To see the door again flung open—to see another armed figure springing across the threshold!

"Della! thank Heaven I have found you in time!" exclaimed Fergus Cameron, his glowing blue eyes taking in the room and its contents at a single glance.

"Back, you bloodhound!" screamed Mercedes del Cavillo, springing to the side of her captive, one hand grasping her by the shoulder, the other drawing back the hammer of her revolver. "Back! or I'll scatter her brains before your very eyes!"

Swift as thought the rescuer flung forward his pistol-hand. There came a flash and a report—and with a wild, choking scream, Mercedes del Cavillo staggered back from her captive, dropping her pistol, pressing both hands to her bosom a look of unutterable horror coming into her face.

"You—murderer!"

Even as the gurgling, choking syllables came from her lips, Fergus Cameron fired a second shot, and the woman fell in a quivering heap to the floor!

"How is it, boss?" cried a coarse voice, as Cinnamon Green showed himself at the door, his bruised face lit up with the light of battle. "Want any help?"

Cameron was by the side of Della, who had swooned again. He looked up, his face pale as death, his voice strained and unnatural as he spoke:

"No help needed, Green. Have you finished—"

"Done up too slick to mention, boss!" with a

harsh laugh. "All the critters down fer keeps but the wimmin, an' they're on thar funkers, prayin' the saints to hurry up ef they want to save 'em alive from us durned harryticks!"

"All—all dead?"

"All but one, boss! We've got the head center at last, wehev!"

"Good!" with a vivid flashing of the blue eyes. "See that you keep a tight grip, for he's proved himself a mighty slippery rascal! I wouldn't lose him now for all the cattle in the Panhandle!"

"He's roped tight enough fer to hold a six-year old Maverick, boss! No git away this trip fer Prince Lucifer—not any!"

"Out and look to the animals, then. We haven't got clear yet. The rest of the gang may come down on us at any moment, and—"

"Boss, the lady hain't croaked, hes she?"

Cinnamon Green was staring at the deathlike countenance of Della Cameron, and her husband stooped to gaze into her face, cutting his swift speech short. A low, choking sound escaped his lips as he caught her up in his arms, carrying her out of the chamber of death, in the fresh air of evening.

At a little distance gathered his cowboys, under lead of Cinnamon Green, their faces grave, their manners subdued as they watched his efforts to restore her to consciousness. Before them, and nearer to the husband and wife, lay a bound form, wrapped securely with ropes, his head bare, his face marked with blood, his garments torn and ragged as though he had submitted only after a long and desperate struggle.

It was upon this figure, this face, that the eyes of Della Cameron first rested as they opened to consciousness after that deathlike swoon. She started convulsively, a low, gasping cry escaping her pallid lips as she recognized in that captive, the man whom she had last seen with a rope about his neck, with Mercedes del Cavillo hampering his arms, both being drawn up through the trap in the ceiling!

"Oscar—alive!" she gasped, stretching out her arms, only to have them restrained with gentle force by her husband.

"Better for him were he dead, my poor child!" gravely uttered the young rancher, as he drew her damp head to his broad breast. "His wild race is well-nigh run! He can no longer deny that he is that audacious criminal, Prince Lucifer!"

Bewildered, confused, with strong emotions chasing each other over her pale face, Della Cameron glanced around her, then held her head back until she could look into the strong, handsome face of the man whose arms pressed her so closely, yet so tenderly. For an instant she seemed not to recognize him. For an instant she even shrank away, trembling, shuddering, as though she recognized an enemy.

"Della—my wife!" muttered Cameron, his own face turning pale as death. "You know me—you are not afraid now?"

"Fergus—it is you—at last!" gasped the poor child, tears springing to her eyes as she buried her face in his bosom, yielding without resistance to his ardent yet gentle embrace.

"Your Fergus, and never again to part with you, my wife!"

And lying there, bound hand and foot, with his jaws cruelly distended by a stout gag, Oscar Radford heard those words, saw that fond embrace—even saw his hated rival press kiss after kiss upon the brow of the sobbing woman! And in his torture he struggled like a madman to burst his bonds, to eject the suffocating gag at least sufficiently to enable him to shout aloud the words that swelled his heart almost to bursting!

And almost fierce though his joy and triumph was, Fergus Cameron could cast a glance at his convulsed face, could even smile with a hard and pitiless exultation at his misery!

"Be durned if the critter ain't ketchin' a taste o' hell afore he gits started on the down-grade!" chuckled Cinnamon Green, watching the captive with undisguised enjoyment. "Good snakes! but ef he swells up much bigger with mad, he'll bu'st wide open! Waal, he jest will now!"

If not quite that, Oscar Radford was overcome by his vain rage, and after a last frantic struggle, his strained muscles suddenly relaxed, his head fell back, and he lay like a corpse. So much like one that Fergus Cameron gave a great start and sharp exclamation, crying:

"Look to the fellow, Cinnamon! Don't let him die now! The gallows mustn't be cheated of its prey! I've sworn to see him hanged!"

That start or the words which broke hotly from his lips, served to rouse Della Cameron from her happy weakness, and she started up to utter a wondering, compassionate cry as she again beheld Oscar Radford.

"Fergus!" she gasped, catching at his arm with frantic energy. "It is a cruel mistake! He is not bad—he risked his life to save me! He ventured alone into that frightful den, and was captured while trying to rescue me! Set him free, and—"

A deft touch of the blonde-bearded lips checked her hasty speech, and then Fergus Cameron soothingly replied:

"It was but part of his sataanic cunning, my

little one! He is the head demon—he is Prince Lucifer himself!"

"Fergus!" gasped Della, but with a low cry of remembrance as she no longer struggled to free herself.

She recalled the words of Mercedes del Cavillo, and felt that this must be the truth at last. Oscar Radford was Prince Lucifer! To him she owed all her suffering! And yet—

"It cannot be true! I will not believe it until I hear him admit as much with his own lips!" she cried passionately, the old love still blazing up in her heart of hearts.

"It is too true, Della," gravely replied Cameron, as he half-carried, half-led her from the spot, pausing when the shades shut out her view of the prisoner. "I know not what happened in yonder, of course, though I can guess something of it from your words. But this I do know, and as the truest mercy I tell it to you, plainly:

"When we surprised that den of evil, Oscar Radford was one of the first to discover us, and the boldest in trying to beat us back. If an honest man, why was he there? Why was he free, with weapons to use on my lads? Why did he fight us until he was overpowered by the weight of numbers? For, darling, I had taken an oath to capture him alive, to expiate his countless crimes on the gallows!"

"I loved him so!" murmured Della, weeping bitterly.

Paler grew the handsome face of the Scotchman. Harder grew his voice, as though he would effect a cure by showing his wife what a monster of crime, duplicity and thorough evil this lover was. It was an heroic remedy, but it would at least prove complete, he thought.

"And the man you loved, Della, shot down your father last evening without a show for himself! My poor child!" as the girl-wife uttered a gasping cry and clung tightly to him, her shaken wits recalling the merciless words which Mercedes del Cavillo had poured into her ears only a few minutes before Oscar Radford burst into the room where she was kept prisoner.

"My father! That terrible woman told me, but I would not believe her! Say that it is a lie—say that poor father is not dead!"

"He is not dead, Della," quickly responded Cameron, and there was truth in his voice—a truth that Della, even in her terrible grief and agitation—could not help but feel. "He is living, though lying very low. He says that he will live at least until he can see you once more. He bade me lose no time, count no risk, but to rescue and bring you back to him without the loss of a moment!"

"Let us go—my poor father!" gasped the half-crazed girl-wife. "At once! Oh, if he should—"

She could not utter the word, though she choked and struggled to complete the sentence begun. And Cameron, with gentle force, placed one palm over her lips, as he hurriedly uttered:

"We will go at once, if you think you are strong enough to bear the ride, my precious!"

"I am—I must bear it!" panted Della, brokenly.

"Then in ten minutes we will be on our way, Della," more confidently responded Cameron. "I must look after matters a little, but I will not be long away. I will call one of the boys to keep guard over you until I can come back. Not that there is any danger to be feared, Della," with a little laugh of assurance, "but I cannot afford to run even the ghost of a chance of again losing my little wife!"

In answer to his sharp call, a couple of cowboys came, in whose care he left his wife. He strode hastily away, pausing where Cinnamon Green was attending to their captive.

"How goes it with him, Cinnamon?" asked Cameron, anxiously.

"All right, boss!" was the prompt response. "For a bit I thought the durned imp was goin' to croak, jest to spile a mighty neat job, but it was only the mad as choked him up, I reckon! He's a bit fainty, like, but he's breathin' all right, an' when the rope is ready, be sure he'll feel the tuggin'!"

"You devill!" gasped Radford, glaring up into the face of his successful rival.

"I guess you're right, Cinnamon," laughed Cameron, turning away and beckoning his head boy to follow.

Leaving the recovering prisoner in the care of his fellows, Green obeyed, listening coolly as Cameron spoke rapidly:

"I had to shoot that woman in yonder, Cinnamon, to save my wife," he said, with a curious faltering for an instant in his tones.

"She was a tiger-cat, boss!"

"I know—so much of a tiger-cat that I will sleep easier if I know just what to expect. Will you go take a look at her, to see if she is really dead? I would, but—"

"I know, boss," gravely. "It comes mighty rough on a gent to hev to shoot a woman—they're so mighty skeerce in these parts!"

"Go look after her, while I set the boys preparing for a long and hard ride. Bring me back word, a sign will be enough, if all is well," hurriedly added the young rancher.

"I'll be back in the twinkle of a bull's tail, boss," nodded the burly cowboy, as he turned and strode off toward the archway.

Fergus Cameron bade his men get their animals in readiness for a night ride, himself superintending the placing of Oscar Radford in the saddle, testing the knots of the ropes that bound him there. But busy though he was, he did not fail to note the return of Cinnamon Green, or to catch the significant gesture with which the cowboy announced the result of his investigations.

Mercedes del Cavillo might haunt the memory of her murderer, but most assuredly she would never again trouble him in the flesh.

And then, taking two cowboys as body-guard, leaving the rest to escort Oscar Radford, Fergus Cameron, with his pale, suffering wife, rode at full speed through the night toward the Dement Ranch.

CHAPTER XIX.

TRIED FOR HIS LIFE.

ONCE more there is a large gathering at the Dement Ranch.

Early that morning the smoke-signals went up through the still air, and bade the neighboring ranchers make all haste to the rendezvous with their weapons ready for use; the signal agreed upon when the wedding-guests separated only such a brief time before.

Riding hard, they answered the signal in person, stern and resolute, grim and merciless, to learn that the stolen bride was recovered, and Prince Lucifer a prisoner!

Some of the counties in the Pan-handle were organized and bad sheriffs and law machinery, but as John Dement faintly muttered, it was justice that was most needed just then.

"Mebbe I hain't got time enough fer to see it through, ef the law sharks ketches holt. Not that I'm goin' to make a die of it ef they's any way o' cheatin' death, little one," smiling up at the pale, haggard face of Della Cameron, who fought hard to keep back her tears. "But I know I wouldn't find the grave big enough to hold me snug ef I went to it afore that dirty whelp gits his desarts! Give him a fa'r shake, an' ef he cain't cl'ar himself, hang him where I kin look on. That's the sort o' medicine I need—not doctor's stuff!"

And so it was that the room in which the wedding ceremony—the room where John Dement's blood still marked the floor, despite all Sally's scrubbing—was arranged for the trial of Oscar Radford, charged with being Prince Lucifer.

And John Dement, stubborn, self-willed as ever, despite his critical condition, actually accepted the proposal made by a joking rancher that he fill the position of judge.

"I'll do it, fri'nds," he said, and his strength seemed to grow with the demand upon it. "I'll fill the position as well as a man kin that hes to lay on a bed. But I'll show weakness only in that way. I will hev a fa'r an' squar' trial, without fear or favor. Ef the evidence says the pris'ner is guilty, he'll be punished as his crimes deserve. Ef it says he ain't guilty, free he'll go, though all the Pan-handle gits up on its hind legs an' roars ag'in' it!"

And so it was arranged. Propped up with pillows on his bed, with Della on one side and the doctor with restoratives on the other, John Dement solemnly opened the court, and the trial of Oscar Radford began.

Pale as death the prisoner stood opposite the bed, irons upon his wrists and a stout rope confining his ankles so that he could take steps only a few inches long. A strong, armed guard stood on each side, ready to grapple with him the instant he should attempt to escape, or there came any signs of an attempted rescue.

There was little effort made to follow the forms of a regular trial. It was not law the ranchers wanted, but justice.

"Oscar Radford!" said John Dement, the excitement seeming to be just the sort of tonic he required. "You are charged with bein' the head man in the gang that is known as the Night-Imps of the Pan-handle. You are charged with bein' the leader—Prince Lucifer, as he calls himself. Ef you be this critter, then they ain't no need o' wastin' any more time pinnin' ye down to a sart'in crime, fer the hull comp'ny knows he's done enough fer to stretch a hundred ropes, ef he hed that many necks!"

"How is it—guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty of a single act for which a white man should blush!"

Clear and distinct came the response, and just the ghost of a flush came into the cheeks of Della Cameron, though she did not dare raise her eyes to glance in that direction.

John Dement frowned a little, but his voice was grave and uneven as he answered:

"That's no more'n your right, pris'ner. It gives you a trial, an' a chaintce to prove yourself innocent, ef you kin do it. An' it gives them you're bein' tried afore—not me alone, but the hull comp'ny—the right to punish you ef you fail to show you ain't the rascal you are charged with bein'!"

The audience drew a long breath of relief, feeling that the trial was now fairly begun. No matter what their private opinions, no mat-

ter what their secret likes or dislikes, the great majority of those then present mentally vowed to be guided solely by the evidence put forward for or against the prisoner. If he was plainly proven to be Prince Lucifer, their votes would be given for hanging; if innocent, then he should be set free, and the search for the real demon be resumed, to continue until the ends of justice were fairly met.

It would be wearisome work giving the evidence in full. There were no lawyers, skilled in cross-examination, thoroughly posted as to what is and what is not admissible evidence. The witnesses probably felt their importance, and though John Dement and the prisoner both at times sought to keep them to the point in question, they each man insisted on giving the account after their own fashion.

Sifted down, the evidence seemed strong against the denial of the accused. Although as yet there had been no positive proof brought forward, the circumstances strongly favored the idea that he was indeed the mysterious masked outlaw.

But then the case seemed to narrow down to a finer point. There were those who told how Oscar Radford had ridden away from the Dement Ranch, on the night of the wedding, immediately after the failure to discover the author of that bold attempt at assassination. And then Fergus Cameron himself took the stand.

Briefly he glanced at the rivalry which had existed between himself and the accused, saying that in no other way could the event which followed be satisfactorily accounted for.

He spoke of the manner in which he had been surprised and taken prisoner at the New Ranch, in company with his bride. He told how they were helplessly pinioned, then left alone with the scarlet mask. He tersely but clearly detailed the vicious threats made by the outlaw, and then answered slowly, positively:

"I am on my oath as you all know. Bitterly as I wish revenge for all I have suffered at the hands of this Prince Lucifer, I would forever abandon that hope rather than bear witness to what I knew or even felt could possibly be a lie."

"Making this statement on oath, and fully realizing the enormity of committing perjury, I distinctly swear that I recognized the voice of Oscar Radford in that of the pretended Prince Lucifer! I swear that I also recognized him by shape, size, figure, and by his general carriage!"

"And I distinctly swear that you lie—either under a mistake or willfully!" sharply cried the accused.

Fergus Cameron did not even look toward the prisoner who hurled these words in his pale face. He stepped forward and took Della by the hand, then faced Oscar Radford, speaking icily:

"Will you ask my wife what her impressions were, Mr. Radford?"

The prisoner gazed keenly into that pale, shrinking face. Della trembled, drawing back, a low gasp of agony escaping her lips. And then the accused, seemingly unmindful of the evil impression his words were sure to leave on the minds of the audience, said slowly:

"I have no questions to ask Miss Dement."

"Because you know she would have to admit that she also recognized your voice and shape! Because she could say more, if more be needed!" cried Cameron, his lips curling, but making no effort to keep Della from returning to the side of her parent. "Because you know your woman accomplice confessed all to her, while threatening her with death at the Rancho del Cavillo! Confessed that you were Prince Lucifer, and that you brought her to the old rancho, to be held for ransom!"

"Your accomplice, not mine, you devil!" grunted Radford, savagely.

Fergus Cameron laughed mockingly.

"Is that the line of defense you have blocked out? So be it! Not even so much audacity can save you! Even there I'll checkmate you!"

John Dement was the next witness, speaking gravely, making no attempt to prove the accused Prince Lucifer, simply telling the story of the demanded ransom, and what happened when he went to pay the sum for which his child was promised freedom.

"I don't say the critter was the pris'ner," he added, gravely. "I only say that he wore the red mask that fits the name of Prince Lucifer, an' that the ev'ard act belongs to Prince Lucifer. Unless the prisoner is proved to be Prince Lucifer, of course my evidence don't count."

"Now I reckon it comes my turn," cried Melancholy Mike, pushing forward, his fat face all aglow. "Sw'ar me, somebody! An' sw'ar me most almighty strong, too! I want every word I speak to count, I do!"

The hard lines which marked the face of the accused perceptibly relaxed at this appearance, but a troubled look came into his dark eyes as he saw Fergus Cameron smiling coldly. Surely, his enemy must have something more behind?

With a good deal of fervor, Melancholy Mike told his story, hiding nothing, seeming to glory in the thought of acting as the friend of the persecuted rancher through thick and thin.

He told how he eavesdropped the interview between John Dement and Dart Malone, the messenger from Prince Lucifer. He frankly told how he carried the news to Oscar Radford, and of the bold plan which they concocted in consequence. He told how they rode hard and fast for the Split Rock, where they lay in ambush through all that followed.

"That's why I know Oscar Radford didn't butcher the boss, ye see!" he added, in a tone of triumph.

"But he did lie by and witness that foul deed without attempting to hinder or avenge it!" sharply interposed Cameron, frowning darkly.

"It was done too quickly, an' you knows it!" bluntly retorted Melancholy Mike, nothing daunted. "You was lookin' on, an' you didn't hinder the bloody murder, did ye? An' you hed twenty men at your back, was ready mounted, an' mighty nigh as cluss as we was, afoot!"

"That I tried my best to avenge, since it was impossible to prevent, let the poor fellows who lost their lives bear evidence!"

"God rest thar bones!" reverently uttered the cowboy, lifting his hat, with an involuntary glance upward. "They was white, clean through! I'd ought to know, seein' they was all my mates—the seven of 'em! An' that's one more mighty curious thing, too!" with a broad and significant grin. "They was ten men from this ranch, an' seven of 'em got killed. They was ten from your ranch, with you at the head fer good count; but I didn't see ary one o' that lot git hurt! Mebbe you kin tell the court how that happened, boss?"

Fergus Cameron turned half-way, as though scorning to notice the broad insinuation, but quickly recovered and replied, his voice cold and contemptuous, his face wearing a hard smile:

"Not through lack of sand, as you seem to hint. They naturally pulled up a little when they saw me fall, my horse shot dead."

"Nother nut to crack, boss!" with a still broader grin. "What made you shoot your hoss?"

"What do you mean, you scoundrel?" grated Cameron, hotly.

"That you cain't skeer me with your ugly looks, Ferg Cameron," was the steady retort, and Melancholy Mike looked "all business" just then. "That I see you shoot your own critter, with your own gun! Why you done it, I won't tell—though mebbe I could give a pritty cluss guess!"

"You lie when you say that! Prince Lucifer shot my horse, just as I fired at him! But even granting you are right," with sudden calming down, "what has that got to do with this case?"

"Ef you ax that question ag'in—when you take the place o' Oscar Radford to stan' your trial fer bein' Prince Lucifer—mebbe I'll answer it too quick!" sharply retorted Melancholy Mike.

His speech created a sensation, but it was short-lived. Cameron simply laughed at the absurd idea, and John Dement bade the fat cowboy stick to his evidence, reminding him that Oscar Radford was on trial, and nobody else, just then.

Melancholy Mike went on to narrate how they had marked the retreat of Prince Lucifer, taking his trail and following it to the old ranch. He described the manner in which he captured the old Mexican, and how they learned that Della Cameron was confined within the ranch.

"Where is this wonderful old man?" asked Cameron, with a peculiar light in his blue eyes. "Why don't you bring him forward as a witness?"

"Fetch him along, boys!" called out Melancholy Mike, promptly.

Through the crowd the two cowboys marched with Old Antone in charge.

By a few pointed questions Cameron drew from him the facts of his capture, much as Melancholy Mike had given them, but he was not content to rest there.

"You told the stranger how he could enter the rancho?" he pursued in cold tones. "You were ready to betray your mistress without even having a threat uttered against you? A faithful servant, truly!"

"It was not betraying, to say what was already known," muttered the old man, with a vicious glance toward the accused.

"What do you mean by that? What was already known? And by whom?"

"I knew his voice. I knew his face when he tore off the silk that covered all but his eyes. I knew he could enter the rancho at will, and so I told him. I thought it strange, but strange things happened every day at the rancho—yes! I said to myself, it is not my affair: the senorita trusts him, so why not I?"

"You recognized him, then? You had met Oscar Radford before?"

"I know not that name, but I know him!" nodding sharply toward the prisoner, now pale and stern.

"And what is it you know of him? If not by that name, what name did you know him by?" persisted Cameron, with evident interest.

"Don Enrique Cristoval. He has worn the scarlet mask many times, and I have ridden with him when he wore it. He wore it when he brought the American girl to the rancho—she, I mean!"

declared Antone, one skinny finger pointing out Della Cameron.

Fergus Cameron smiled blandly as he turned toward the astonished and thoroughly disgusted cowboy, saying:

"Take your witness, Melancholy Mike! I believe I am through with him for the present!"

"But I am not!" sharply cried Oscar Radford, pale as a corpse, for he could not mistake the awful weight this testimony would have with those listening, and against him. "Look at me, you withered scoundrel! Look at me closely, bearing in mind that the life of an innocent man may depend upon your truth! Look at me well, and then say: am I the man you have just declared? Did you ever see me at that ranch before? Have you ever known me to wear that red mask, playing the part of this dastardly Prince Lucifer?"

Steadily Old Antone gazed at the accused while these words came leaping hotly from his lips. And steadily he replied:

"What I have spoken is the truth, Don Enrique. I can kiss the blessed crucifix and repeat my words. You are one of the band, and one of the most trusted. You have worn the red mask. You wore it when you brought the girl home. If I had not known all this—if I had not known the Senorita Mercedes trusted you even as she trusted herself—would I have told you all you asked when with El Gordo, yonder?" pointing toward the fat cowboy.

Then came a swaying to and fro of the crowd. A low muttering began to make itself heard—the terrible sound that so often ends in a savage yell for blood!

Oscar Radford sternly faced the peril, though he knew from experience how little it would require to change the spectators into a howling, bloodthirsty mob. John Dement harshly called for order.

"I'll blow a hole through the fu'st man as raises a cry for lynchin'!" he cried, raising a pair of heavy revolvers and cocking them. "It's plain jestice we want, an' not murder! Wait until the hull story is told, an' then we'll do the hangin'. It won't be long, from the looks!"

"Let it be long or soon, I ask time to tell my story, and to fling the foul charge back in the teeth of those who utter it!" cried Oscar Radford, with almost savage energy.

Instantly silence reigned. Why not wait? As the "judge" suggested, it could not be for much longer.

"That withered devil lies!" sternly cried Radford pointing a quivering finger at the old Mexican. "It is not hard to see whose influence makes him bear false witness! It is not difficult to point out the real criminal whom he is shielding by seeking my death.

"I did enter the lone ranch, but it was with my life in my hands. It was to set at liberty the daughter of John Dement, whom I never loved more purely, more intensely, than at this very moment!

"She can tell the story of my attempt, and how it failed, for she saw me captured by a foul trick! And when that devil in human shape!" pointing at Fergus Cameron, who smiled icily as he met that blazing gaze, "when that man came in, he found me a prisoner, bound hand and foot! He lies when he says that I was free and armed. If I had been, he would fill the place I now occupy—he would have these irons on his wrists—the hangman's noose would throw its shadow over his face, instead of over mine!"

Oscar Radford was far too excited to make his account fall with much weight upon the audience. It sounded too much like the wild raving of one who sees the noose surely closing around his neck—who is making a last desperate effort to secure revenge on the man whose courage and wit had brought him to bay, after so long a defiance of all laws.

Already the crowd was growing impatient and beginning to mutter at the useless waste of time, when a sudden stir among the cowboys on the outside announced a fresh sensation. And then, bearing a litter, a number of men entered the room, raising one end of the blood-stained support so that its occupant—Mercedes del Cavillo, looking like a dead woman, only for the great, staring eyes—could glance around her.

Pale and trembling, Cameron glared at the unexpected vision—for vision it seemed, more than reality. And as a white hand lifted to point him out, he cowered back, one hand clutching at a weapon.

"That man murdered me—but yonder stands Prince Lucifer!" the woman gasped, and she pointed last direct at Oscar Radford!

CHAPTER XX.

REVENGE IS SWEETER THAN LIFE!

THERE could be no mistaking her words or the action that accompanied them. All could see her dark eyes turn upon Oscar Radford as her wax-like finger also turned from Fergus Cameron to the accused. And though she spoke neither name, all knew that she accused Oscar Radford of being the real Prince Lucifer!

Then—the red blood burst from her lips, dyeing her white robe scarlet. She gasped pain-

fully, her great eyes turning toward Fergus Cameron. She stretched out her arms and gasped brokenly:

"My love! Forgive—as I—forgive!"

Her arms dropped heavily, her head fell to one shoulder, and with a start the bearers lowered the litter to the floor, for all who looked on knew that death had claimed its prey!

Only for that—only for the awe which such a death ever inspires in the most hardy—Oscar Radford would have been torn away to die the death of a dog!

But before the chilling sensation could die out, one of the litter-bearers dashed the slouched hat from his head, and stepped to the side of the dead woman, one hand touching her bloody robe, the other pointing direct at Fergus Cameron as he cried sternly:

"By the blood of this martyr—by the blood of my fathers! I denounce THAT MAN as the real Prince Lucifer!"

Even before he uttered a word, a savage curse hissed over the lips of Fergus Cameron, and he tore a revolver from his belt; but only to have his arms grasped by two stout men, who twisted them behin' him, snapping a pair of handcuffs about his wrists! And as a low, startled chorus ran around the room, they exhibited bright badges on their breasts, and said:

"In the name of the law! This man is our prisoner!"

"On what charge? By what right?" hoarsely demanded John Dement, who would have sprung out of bed, despite his wounds, only for Della lying across his lap, in a dead swoon!

"As a thief, robber and murderer!" was the stern response, as the officers drew their revolvers, plainly determined to hold their man.

"And I denounce him as the real Prince Lucifer, I tell you!" hardly, fiercely repeated the man with a hand on the bosom of the corpse. "I declare that he is the chief of the outlaw gang known as the Night-Imps of the Panhandle!"

"An' who the devil are you?" harshly cried Dement, staring with growing wonder from the speaker to the face of Oscar Radford, then back again. "Ef I didn't see Oscar Radford over yonder, I'd swear you was him, yourself!"

There were others who noticed the strong resemblance, and none among them who seemed more astounded than did Old Antone.

"A thief, an outlaw!" harshly replied the stranger. "My name is Henry Christopher, just as this murdered lady has, just as yonder foul assassin has, time and time again!"

"Don Enrique!" gasped Old Antone, staring at the speaker, then shivering with superstitious awe as he glanced toward Oscar Radford. "Then who is that—that senor?"

"An innocent man—the victim of yonder devil!" with a quivering finger pointing out Fergus Cameron.

"Take keer, you!" muttered John Dement, scarcely knowing what he said, but vaguely remembering his election as judge. "You're twistin' the rope fer your own thrapple!"

A hard, reckless laugh greeted that warning.

"Revenge is sweeter than life! What care I for my neck, as long as I twist the noose that sends him to Tophet?"

"You see—it is revenge work, all!" hoarsely cried Cameron, with a desperate effort to steady his voice. "It is to get even with me for breaking up the gang! Don't listen to him. Don't—"

"It is to make you suffer for your atrocious treachery to this poor woman!" sternly retorted Christopher, with a glance at the marble face of the corpse. "You murdered her, when she looked for you to murder the other, as you agreed!"

"It is a lie! Protect me—don't let them lynch me!" gasped the miserable wretch, cowering between his captors as he heard the growing sound that invariably heralds the mad rush of a vindictive mob. "Don't let them drag me away to death! I'll confess all—I'll own up to everything—only save me!"

The miserable wretch sealed his own fate by this frantic pleading for protection. He said enough to show that he was rightfully accused, and with a mad roar and resistless rush, the mob surged forward and back again. All in a breath, as it were, but their work was done even in that brief space.

The two detectives were beaten down. The criminal was torn from their grasp, and hustled out of doors, notwithstanding the desperate efforts which a few men made to resist—among them Henry Christopher, Melancholy Mike, and even Oscar Radford, hampered though the latter was.

Dragged out of doors, to be cast across the saddle of the nearest horse—to be held there by men who rode on either side of him—to be carried off in the direction of the New Ranch, and afterward, to be found hanging by the neck under the tree to which Prince Lucifer pinned his note of warning on the night of Della Cameron's abduction.

In that mad rush, Henry Christopher was knocked down and crippled too badly to escape, even had he wished to do so. He afterward declared that he had no such wish; that

all he wanted of life now was to live long enough to tell his story, and prove to all the world what an arch-demon Fergus Cameron had been.

His tale was told, and many things discovered that went far to prove it no more than the simple truth. It was a wild, almost incredible story, but a brief synopsis of it must serve our purpose.

Fergus Cameron was the head and front of the dangerous band that had for nearly two years terrorized the Pan-handle. To him it owed its existence, to his clear wit and bold audacity it owed the almost unbroken success which had attended its movements, up to the night of his wedding with the daughter of John Dement.

It was not often that Fergus Cameron wore that scarlet and black disguise, though he had done so on more than one occasion. So had Mercedes del Cavillo, and so had Henry Christopher; the latter by far the most frequently.

Fergus Cameron was the lover of Mercedes del Cavillo, and had been such almost from his first coming to the Pan-handle, though he had contrived to keep that fact well hidden.

She heard of his courting the daughter of John Dement, and taxed him with it. He swore that he was only in sport; that he did not love her; that he had love only for Mercedes. Then he dwelt on the wealth of the old rancher, and gradually led Mercedes into assenting to the plot which was afterward so nearly carried out.

If possible he was to supplant Oscar Radford. If by no other means, Henry Christopher, who bore a marvelously close resemblance to the young rancher in face and figure, was to permit his face to be seen and apparently recognized while playing the part of Prince Lucifer. The crime was thus to be sworn on Radford, and his pretensions, if not his life as well, thus destroyed.

Fergus Cameron was to win the girl, and even marry her. She was to be stolen away from him on the night of the wedding—so Mercedes sternly insisted—and seemingly held for ransom. John Dement was to be killed, thus making his daughter, and through her Fergus Cameron, heir to the property. Della was to be held in captivity, until Cameron came to rescue her. In the confusion Della was to be slain, thus removing the last obstacle from the path of the plotters.

Every effort was to be made to cast suspicion upon Oscar Radford, and, if possible, he was to be slain and the disguise placed upon him, unless the proofs could be arranged so as to convict him plainly of being the criminal; then he was to be hanged.

It was Henry Christopher who captured Della and in obedience to his instructions he closely imitated the voice of his double. It was Henry Christopher who received the ransom money from the hands of John Dement, and left him for dead.

Fergus Cameron did shoot his horse, as an excuse for keeping out of the firing which followed the springing of the ambush. And his men, who formed part of the Imps, understood what they were doing when they drew rein, apparently to aid their master, but in reality to insure the defeat or death of the honest portion of the company.

Why did Henry Christopher do all this? Why did he come to yield himself up to almost certain death?

For revenge on the man who killed the woman he loved better far than his own life!

They had deceived him, too. They swore that if he worked faithfully, his love should be rewarded—that Mercedes, who was tired of Fergus Cameron, even as he had grown weary of her, would marry him, and with their share of the money won by their bold scheme, she and he would go far away to forget the dark past in the rosy future!

He came back to find her mortally wounded. In the first heat of her anger against her treacherous slayer, Mercedes told him all, concealing nothing, even her own part in the deception which was practiced against him. And she begged him to carry her to the Dement Ranch, that she might denounce her murderer and tear the cunning mask from his evil face.

She was borne thither, but at the last moment her great love triumphed over revenge, and she branded Oscar Radford as Prince Lucifer!

He explained many of the audacious tricks which Prince Lucifer, in one form or another, had been enabled to play. He was the mask who stopped the bridegroom and his party, and that was part of the plan to more surely shield Cameron when the tragedy was worked out. It was half-intended to implicate Oscar Radford in that act, but this was hindered by his presence at the wedding.

It was never fully known why Fergus Cameron shot Mercedes instead of Della, as he had agreed to; but it was generally supposed that his love for her had grown deeper since the bargain was made, and that by killing the Spanish woman he could still win the wealth he coveted, together with a wife.

It was Mercedes del Cavillo who stopped David Ashbrook and sent the mourning dress by him as a gift to the bride.

But why dilate? Surely enough has been said for the perfect understanding of the reader!

John Dement recovered from his wounds, though he was never the strong man he had been before that black treachery. And as he could not part from Della, who was his pet nurse, Oscar Radford had to come to Dement Ranch instead. He made no objections, however!

Melancholy Mike finally coaxed Sally into marrying him, which she did with numerous "Ketch me's I" And to-day they are settled in comfort on the ranch vacated by the husband of Della Cameron.

Henry Christopher was turned free, in consideration of his great services in pointing out the real members of Prince Lucifer's band of Night-Imps. Whither he went, or what has befallen him, no one seems to know or care.

Cinnamon Green and his fellow rascals were duly punished for their crimes, a few by hanging, more by whipping and banishment.

Kate Brinson finally consented to make Fred Marble happy, and according to all accounts, her success is remarkable.

THE END.

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